

## Doctoral Thesis

# **Do experiences make us wise? An exploration of spousal bereavement in later life.**

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## **Abstract**

**Background** Increases in life expectancy mean that spousal bereavement is increasingly delayed to later life, and therefore likely to occur in the context of other challenges and losses. Such life events may serve as an opportunity for the enhancement of personal wisdom. However, the experience of wisdom following spousal bereavement in later life has been overlooked in the literature.

**Methodology** This study uses constructivist grounded theory to explore the process of wisdom development in individuals following spousal bereavement in later life. Individual semi-structured interviews were completed and data was transcribed and analysed using a constant comparative method by the researcher.

**Results** Six categories emerged from the interviews: initial impact of loss, triggers (to being open to experiences), being open to experiences, wisdom – learning from experience, positive change, and remaining connected. It was found that the development of being open to experiences, wisdom – learning from experience and positive change was not linear and that this was an interactive and dynamic process.

**Conclusion** After being faced with challenges associated with the death of a spouse, participants developed a sense of positive change and wisdom, the latter in regards to learning to reflect on different perspectives, being better able to deal with emotions, having greater empathy and compassionate concern for others and tolerating uncertainty. Positive change and wisdom then influenced openness further, as individuals felt a

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greater sense of being able to deal with the potential ups and downs of being open to experiences.

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## **1. Background and Introduction**

### **1.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter will begin by presenting the context for the research project; describe how theories of wisdom have developed and, critique current measurements of wisdom, and discuss the potential applications of wisdom to spousal bereavement in later life. The potentially overlapping construct of post-traumatic growth (PTG) after adverse life events will also be discussed alongside. It will also be argued that given the idiosyncratic nature of bereavement, and the complexity of wisdom and PTG, that a qualitative approach in which there is an emphasis on rich description and exploration of meaning will be advantageous. The rationale for this thesis overall will be outlined, alongside the main research questions.

### **1.2 Context of Research**

Age at the time of spousal death increased by almost seven years from 1971 to 2001 (the median age increasing from 65 to 72), with three quarters aged over 65 years in 2001 (Hirst & Corden, 2010). Therefore, as spousal bereavement is increasingly being delayed to later life, this is likely to occur in the context of other challenges for older people other age-related losses such as physical, occupational, community and social losses (Jeffreys, 2011). An integrative review by Naef, Ward, Mahrr-Imhof, and Grand (2013) exploring the experience of spousal bereavement in older persons (aged >65 years), that included 39 studies, found particular disruption post-bereavement related to daily activities, loneliness, declining health and changed social and family relationships (the latter as both a

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challenge and a resource). A limitation of the findings by Naef et al. (2013) was that studies included involved mainly women, which limits the generalisability. However, this may reflect the higher proportion of widowed females in later life and the demographic picture of ageing in the UK (Office For National Statistics, 2017).

Despite the challenges of spousal bereavement in later life, there has been a growing emphasis on positive aspects of ageing that are thought to buffer against losses that allow older adults to 'age well' (Ardelt, 2000).

Positive psychology is an area of psychology concerned with what allows individuals and groups to flourish and to live well, despite the challenges and difficulties encountered during the lifespan (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Positive psychology perspectives have acknowledged the importance of promoting a strengths focused approach alongside the traditional 'pathology' focused approach to wellbeing (Roberts, Thomas, & Morgan, 2016). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) further propose the importance of not just identifying already existing strengths but in building new ones. One such area is in bereavement, which has historically been approached through a pathology reduction lens, potentially due to there being limited knowledge of individuals that have not come into contact with services (Harvey, 2001). Bereavement in later life is likely to be a complex, dynamic and subjective process that may involve painful losses in some domains, and gains in others.

One aspect of positive psychology that has seen a steady increase in interest and research is in the conceptualisation and measurement of wisdom. The literature pertaining to wisdom is vast, spanning philosophical, psychological and neuroscience perspectives. Erik Erikson's model of

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psychosocial development, identified wisdom as the ideal endpoint and as virtue of later life (Erikson, 1959). In later life, if an individual is able to resolve the stage of integrity vs despair; they are able to accept the life that has been led rather than have regrets about not taking different paths in life (Erikson, 1959). Not negotiating through this stage successfully would lead to despair and an unconscious fear of death (Erikson, 1959). The model has been criticised as being based on speculation rather than empirical evidence, and of being a descriptive rather than explanatory (e.g., it does not explain how individuals negotiate through the various stages of development; Zhang, 2015). However, Erikson (1959) introduced notions of later life as having the potential for positive personality growth.

Baltes and Smith (1990) aimed to introduce the concept of wisdom into the domain of psychology and provide empirical evidence for it, which will be discussed in sections to follow. The concept of wisdom as being associated with ageing and older people may retain some 'currency' amongst many people, which is commonly seen as a trait associated with ageing and growth through adversity (Laidlaw, 2013). Lay persons view wisdom as being a positive attribute associated with ageing (Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989). However, this may result from positive stereotypes of ageing (e.g., Gordon & Jordan, 2017). Research has indicated that wisdom is relatively variable and can be found in adolescence (Smith & Baltes, 1990). Another perspective on this is that experience plays a role in the development of wisdom, which therefore enhances the likelihood that wisdom will emerge with increasing age (Ardelt, 2004). As such the perspective adopted here is that wisdom while viewed as a positive outcome

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of ageing, has in fact very little to do with the chronological age of an individual. Wisdom is not therefore an outcome of ageing per se (Ardelt, 2004).

Wisdom as measured through self-report across affective, cognitive and reflective domains was positively associated with increased life satisfaction, physical health and strength of family relationships in older women (Ardelt, 2000). Wisdom also correlated with wellbeing after controlling for advantaged life conditions and demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, age, gender and marital status (Ardelt & Edwards, 2015). Furthermore, it was found that for individuals living in a hospice or in a nursing home, wisdom was more strongly correlated to wellbeing than for those living in the community, indicating that in the presence of difficult life circumstances such as physical decline and the approach of death, wisdom may hold a particular relevance to enhanced emotional regulation and wellbeing (Ardelt & Edwards, 2015). It is furthermore suggested that wisdom has importance in improving older peoples' life conditions. Ardel and Edwards (2015) suggest that living well also depends on cognitive, reflective and affective aspects of wisdom that may have been gained earlier on in life through learning to cope successfully with crises and obstacles. They go on further to suggest that people at all stages of the life course should be encouraged to engage in psychosocial growth in order to facilitate a meaningful and satisfactory later life.

In contrast to Erikson's (1959) definition of wisdom as being the ideal endpoint of development, contemporary models of wisdom emphasise the role of experience in the development of wisdom rather than age (e.g.,

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Ardelt, 2013; Baltes & Smith, 1990; Webster, 2007), therefore the models discussed in the following sections are not specific to older adult populations. Older people are not necessarily 'wise' but potentially have a lifetime of experiences to draw upon.

Furthermore, there are numerous conceptualisations of wisdom in the literature, with varying levels of usefulness and clinical applicability (Bangen, Meeks & Jeste, 2013). Therefore, the following discussion of the wisdom literature is not exhaustive. Conceptualisations were selected that were based upon rigorous supporting evidence and had relevance to the development of wisdom through experience.

### **1.3 Approaches to the Study of Wisdom**

#### **1.3.1 Quantitative approaches.**

Wisdom has been defined as 'an expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life.' (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 122). The authors suggest wisdom is knowledge-based, concerns judgement and advice giving around uncertain and challenging life events, and is utilised for the personal benefit and for the collective good. As part of the 'Berlin Wisdom Paradigm' empirical evidence was gathered for a model of wisdom by presenting individuals with hypothetical life dilemmas and asking them to think aloud about the problem (e.g., 'A 15-year old girl wants to get married right away. What should one/she consider and do?'; e.g., Baltes & Staudinger, 2000). This is then rated across a number of domains (factual knowledge, procedural knowledge, life-span contextualism, value relativism, and management of uncertainty) as defined by a panel of wisdom

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experts (Smith, Staudinger & Baltes, 1994; Staudinger, Maciel, Smith, & Baltes, 1998). Factual knowledge involves knowing about human nature and the life course; procedural knowledge involves knowing how to overcome and deal with life's challenges; life span contextualism entails having an awareness of the many contexts of life and how this may shift over the lifespan; value relativism concerns acknowledging that there are differences in individual, societal and cultural values; and uncertainty involves understanding the unpredictability of life and the limits to ones' own knowledge. Wisdom in this context is thought to consist of knowledge that is accumulated throughout the lifespan (Baltes & Smith, 1990). Accordingly, wisdom provides a framework within which decisions about how one should lead a 'good life' can be made (Baltes & Smith, 1990). Evidence for the assertion that wisdom is accumulated throughout the lifespan may come from a study in which it was found that those with expertise in a profession aligned to dealing with difficult life problems (i.e., Clinical Psychologists) gained greater scores on criteria of wisdom (Smith et al., 1994). Although it is possible that those individuals that had greater levels of wisdom were drawn to enter such professions.

Research completed by the Berlin Wisdom Group (e.g., Smith, et al., 1994; Staudinger et al., 1998) has paved the way for further development in the area. Measures employed within the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm demonstrate acceptable validity and reliability. However, the model has been criticised for having 'selected populations and defined wisdom in terms of characteristics which those populations associate with it' (McKee & Barber, 1999; p. 149). Thus suggesting that wisdom as a resource is reserved to an

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‘elite’, rather than a construct accessible more widely, and therefore a perspective which limits the clinical applicability of wisdom. Furthermore, a limitation of the measure is that it requires much training in administration and scoring (Staudinger, Smith, & Baltes, 1994).

Ardelt (2009) has criticised the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm for being overly focused on ‘cold’ cognition, and for not attending to reflective and affective aspects of wisdom. Kunzmann and Baltes (2005) had previously acknowledged the potential role of emotion in wisdom, but from the perspective that an individual who is sought for advice must be able to understand and empathise with others’ emotional experiences. They also stated that such empathic qualities must be present in any individual willing to expend the resources involved in wisdom-related thinking.

Another conception of wisdom places the individual within a social context, and emphasises the efforts of working towards the ‘common good’. Sternberg (1998) suggested that intelligence alone is not enough to make a person ‘wise’, but that wisdom involves a balance between: ‘multiple (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests in order to achieve a balance among: (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments’ (p.347). Here, adaptation to existing environments entails changing oneself or ones’ behaviour; shaping of environments involves taking action to change ones’ environment; and selection of environments may involve leaving an environment, if adaptation or shaping are not possible. Therefore, wisdom involves creating a solution to life’s problems that reaches a goal in which the outcome is optimised across those interests involved (Staudinger & Glück,



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2011). This definition of wisdom allows for the corroboration of self-perceptions of wisdom development, as wisdom can be evaluated on the basis of the outcome of the 'wise' person's actions (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2016).

Ardelt (2004) asserted that wisdom must be personally realised. In this approach to understanding wisdom, termed 'three dimensional model of wisdom', there is a focus on the operationalisation and standardisation of wisdom as a concept through self-report. In this approach Ardelt (2003; 2004) argues that dimensions of wisdom are interconnected and develop together across cognitive, affective and reflective domains.

From a cognitive perspective, Ardelt (2003) suggests individuals are able to see reality accurately and how this relates to intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of life: "Wise individuals, however, do not only know how to master the outside world, but also how to master the inner world of emotions." (Ardelt, 2008, p85). As such this model of wisdom focuses upon competence in the affective domain. The affective domain involves having sympathy and compassion towards others and involves the presence of positive emotions towards others. The reflective dimension refers to overcoming subjectivity and being able to look into phenomena from different perspectives; this also involves having self-insight and engaging in self-examination. Accordingly, this allows a greater insight into ones' own and others' perspectives in order to interact with others in a compassionate way (Achenbaum & Orwoll, 1991). Ardelt (2003) developed the three-dimensional wisdom scale to measure self-reported wisdom across these domains, including items such as 'I would feel much better if my present circumstances

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changed', and 'I can be comfortable with all kinds of people'. She suggested that everyone has wisdom to a lesser or greater extent, and that wisdom allows the individual to change perspective, and to view situations from different viewpoints. This is likely to be beneficial when considering dealing with uncertain or challenging events. Similarly to measures employed by the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, Ardel's (2003) measure of wisdom demonstrated acceptable validity and reliability.

Webster (2007) also defines wisdom as multidimensional, but places particular emphasis on the role of life experience. He defines wisdom as the competent application of critical life events in order to facilitate self-development. Webster's (2007) model proposes five dimensions of wisdom (critical life experiences, reminiscence / reflectiveness, openness to experience, emotion regulation and humour). The dimension of critical life experiences refers to rich and varied experiences, and coping with important life transitions, as well as exposure to life's "darker" side. The dimensions of reminiscence / reflectiveness refers to using past memories to maintain identity, to connect the past with the present and in doing so gaining perspective. Openness to experience refers to having an interest in new experiences, and a curiosity towards different values, beliefs and ideas. Emotion regulation involves the exposure to a full spectrum of emotions, and an acceptance of the full spectrum of emotions, as well as the ability to deal with them appropriately. The final dimension of humour, which has been relatively unexplored in the wisdom literature, involves recognition of life's ironies, and reflects a mature coping strategy that has prosocial implications. Webster also developed a self-measure Likert type scale that demonstrated

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acceptable validity and reliability, and included items such as 'I have experienced many painful events in my life', and 'At this point in my life, I find it hard to laugh at my mistakes'.

Webster (2007) has argued that adverse life events accrue over the lifespan and contribute to wisdom development. Therefore, it is in the presence of reflecting on life events, and being able to learn and grow from experience that is the means by which an individual may become wise. In support of this, Webster et al. (2014) found a peak in wisdom in mid-life, which might be explained by greater life experience, e.g., working age adults with potentially dependent children and parents.

Some variation in the above wisdom literature is evident in regards to the emphasis placed upon aspects of wisdom. It is likely that outcomes are dependent upon context and how wisdom is measured; individuals' responses are limited by what questions they are asked and therefore, aspects of wisdom that are not itemised on the measure will not be explored. Another criticism of the above approaches to the measurement of wisdom is lack of respondents' ability to elaborate on their answers, resulting in context and meaning being lost. Furthermore, Staudinger and Glück (2011) have pointed out that highly naïve individuals with high self-esteem may score highly for self-reported wisdom, whereas an individual who has greater levels of wisdom may attempt to evaluate themselves accurately against a high standard. Issues around positive self-presentation and inaccuracies around individual's self-judgements may also be relevant (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Whilst this suggests that performance based measures (such as that utilised in the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm) may be at an advantage in this

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regards, it is also argued the extent to which other people are able to judge wisdom that is more personally realised. A distinction between personal and general forms of wisdom has been made, and this will be discussed in sections to follow. However, despite some variation, a review by Bangen, Meeks and Jeste (2013) found overlap in 24 reviewed definitions of wisdom, in the domains of: knowledge of life, prosocial values, self-understanding, and acknowledgment of uncertainty, emotional homeostasis, tolerance, openness, spirituality, and sense of humour.

### **1.3.2 Qualitative approaches.**

A relatively recently proposed model of wisdom: the MORE Life Experience Model is based upon research concerned with the personal development of wisdom (Glück & Bluck, 2013).

The authors did not utilise a questionnaire based measure to quantify wisdom, but utilised interviews in which participants were asked to reflect on a time in which they were wise, and how this was integrated into their life's narrative. This is a departure from earlier attempts to measure wisdom in the literature. For instance, in one study, Bluck and Glück (2004) interviewed participants aged 15 to 70 years of age, about a situation in which they felt that they had acted wisely. Most individuals chose events that were difficult or challenging (such as dealing with family conflict, deciding to change career, or having a serious accident), with many having had extracted a lesson learned or new philosophy from the experience.

According to the MORE Life Experience model, individuals who are considered to be wise display characteristics of mastery, openness to

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experience, reflective attitude and emotional regulation skills (Glück & Bluck, 2013). The authors do not propose that these are domains of wisdom per se, but propose they are characteristics that allow an individual to develop wisdom and that these characteristics are interrelated and are developed through a process of navigating through challenging life events. A sense of mastery involves facing challenges head on, or being adaptable to change. The authors emphasised the importance of openness to experience in the development of wisdom, as individuals are more likely to seek out situations in which wisdom might be developed. A reflective attitude was posited as being motivated to think deeply in order to gain meaning from past events. Finally, emotion regulation skills involve being able to accurately perceive one's own emotions and to regulate responses to this, as well as being able to empathise with others and to treat others with compassion. People can develop these resources through seeking out wisdom – fostering experiences and through dealing with challenging life events.

Further support for the link between life experience and wisdom comes from Choi and Landeros (2011), who explored the process of wisdom, through interview, in older adults who were nominated as wise. In that study, ageing-service providers in Central Texas (i.e., services designated to promote well-being and promote independence of older people in the community) were asked to select individuals of low-moderate income that exhibited 'kindness, compassion and a sense of justice for all'. Participants reflected upon challenging earlier life experiences (including becoming a single parent due to divorce or spousal bereavement; and racial discrimination) and how they have shaped how they behaved within the

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world that can be considered as wise. The kind of lessons that emerged were a focus on the present and a positive attitude; the importance of seeking support from others; not focusing on material things and perseverance. Therefore, individuals cited a range of difficult life experiences that they perceived to be associated with personal wisdom.

Glück and Bluck (2013) have reported being more concerned with individuals 'experienced wisdom', suggesting that external observers might judge that the individual did not act in a wise way, but that for the individual themselves there may have been a sense of learning a lesson from an event and of it 'making things better' (Bluck & Glück, 2004). Vishnersky et al. (2015) however, acknowledged the challenge of eliciting themes of wisdom by asking about wisdom, bearing in mind a possible paradox in exploring personally realised wisdom by asking individuals about it, as perhaps individuals tend not to think of themselves as the prototypically wise. In their study they interviewed nurses about their experiences of growth and wisdom and found that individuals had some difficulty in verbalising how they were wise. However, wisdom themes could be elicited through conversations about more general aspects of change and growth.

A particular strength of the studies by Bluck and Glück (2004), and Choi and Landeros (2011) was the focus on wisdom as a process, which enhances clinical applicability. However, the individuals reflected on past experiences (sometimes as far back as childhood). No studies could be identified that explore experienced wisdom following spousal bereavement in later life.

#### **1.4 Wisdom: Age and Gender.**

Age differences were found in wisdom narratives in individuals asked about a time in which they had acted wisely (Glück, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005). The authors found that younger adults, middle aged adults and older adults reported similar events (e.g., life decisions), however, three different forms of wisdom emerged (empathy and support; self-determination and assertion; and balance and flexibility), with older people recalling more events which involved knowledge and flexibility as the predominant form of wisdom, with middle-aged adults recalling more events around self-determination and assertion, and younger adults around empathy and support. The authors suggested that this mirrored normative life challenges at particular life stages. For instance, older adults may find that flexibility is crucial in allowing them to successfully navigate through a time in life in which roles have become less clear (Glück et al., 2005).

When making comparisons between the qualities that older people and younger people attribute to wisdom, it was found that cognitive conceptions of wisdom (i.e., developing from general life experience and learning from others) decreased across the life-span in favour of more integrative conceptions (i.e., developing through emotionally challenging life events and involving benevolence, empathy, love for humanity, self-reflection and acceptance of others' values; Glück & Bluck, 2011). Exposure to, and development through events that are personally challenging may cause individuals to have increased appreciation of those events as contributing to the development of wisdom. As has previously been noted, although age is not sufficient for wisdom development, increased age brings with it greater

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potential to navigate through challenging life events. People's theories of wisdom may reflect their current life stage and what they have learned from previous life stages (Glück & Bluck, 2011). A limitation of that study however, was that it used a brief questionnaire format and did not explore the impact of specific life experiences on conceptions of wisdom.

Characteristics associated with men's and women's wisdom appear not to differ (Glück et al., 2010). However, when describing experiences of themselves as being wise, men tended to cite more jobs related events and women tended to report more events related to interpersonal domains (Glück, Strasser, & Bluck, 2009). It is not known whether this translates to gender differences in what men and women consider to be characteristics wisdom however (Levenson, 2009).

The above studies indicate that there appear to be some differences in individuals' conceptions of what wisdom is and the weighting that they give to various domains of wisdom. Therefore, again indicating the importance of exploring context and meaning.

### **1.5 Distinction Between General and Personal Wisdom.**

Staudinger and Glück (2011) have made a differentiation between personally realised wisdom, and general wisdom. The authors identified general wisdom as pertaining to advice giving and assisting others from a third-person perspective, and personal wisdom as being concerned with personal insight based on experience (wisdom may be seen as developing on a continuum, with general forms of wisdom preceding those in personal wisdom), and that an individual may be seen as wise by others and sought



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out for advice, but may not be wise about their own life or problems (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Threatening information that is self-directed may be more likely to be suppressed or modified in comparison to that relating to others (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). As such, personal wisdom may be more challenging to achieve, but also has relevance when considering navigating through adverse personal events such as spousal bereavement. In their review, a distinction was proposed between general and personal wisdom based upon relative emphasis on wisdom involving personal experience, and that involving an insight into life based on an observer's perspective. Of the models of wisdom discussed here, the authors proposed the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm and Sternberg's model as being concerned with general aspects of wisdom; and Ardelt's, Webster's as being concerned with personal wisdom. The MORE Life Experience Model is also concerned with personal wisdom (Glück & Bluck, 2013).

### **1.6 'Posttraumatic Growth' and 'Posttraumatic Wisdom'**

There is a growing body of research that has focused on the positive changes that arise out of traumatic experiences in terms of personal growth that may have some relevance to wisdom. Terms in the literature appear to be used interchangeably to depict such a process, e.g., benefit finding (Affleck & Tennen, 1996), adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004), or stress-related growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996). However, Calhoun (2006) with the term 'Posttraumatic Growth' (PTG) emphasises a reorganising of one's priorities and goals, leading to a higher level of functioning than before the event, rather than a return to baseline that may

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be seen in individuals that are resilient. PTG occurs after what can be perceived as 'a watershed that divides life into 'before and after' the event, it has been traumatic and it can initiate the cognitive engagement that produces PTG' (Calhoun, 2006, p. 9).

An event can be seen as a trauma in that it disrupts the foundations of previously held assumptions about the world (e.g., around safety and identity; Calhoun, 2006). Calhoun (2006), builds upon earlier work by Janoff-Bulman (1992) who identified three core assumptions that make up an individual's worldview prior to a traumatic event: the world is benevolent, the world is meaningful, and the self is worthy. The world as benevolent refers to the idea that others tend to have good intentions, with events generally having positive outcomes. The world as meaningful, implies some cause and effect relationship between events and outcomes, and the idea that negative events are neither haphazard nor arbitrary. Finally, the self as worthy, refers to individuals' tendency to judge themselves as competent, able and moral. A traumatic event reveals these assumptions about the world as being 'optimistic illusions', leading to a sense of disillusionment and insecurity (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggests that the shattering of old assumptions about the self and the world leads to three coping strategies, in an attempt to rebuild the assumptive world in a way that will incorporate the trauma. Firstly, the individual fluctuates between confronting and avoiding trauma-related thoughts, images, and feelings; secondly, the individual engages in a process of re-evaluation in order to preserve some of the old assumptions, whilst attempting to find meaning in the experience (i.e., purpose or benefit); thirdly, there is an emphasis on social support which

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may be experienced as helpful, or as an impedance to recovery. This view, sees the perception of growth as being a way to cope with trauma, and that individuals can move on with their lives, no longer with a sense of 'victimization', but with some degree of disillusionment and sense of personal vulnerability that was absent prior to the trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) propose that growth can be seen as an outcome of attempts to cope with trauma. They propose, similarly to Janoff-Bulman (1992) that disruption of assumptions about the world and self can act as a catalyst to cognitive restructuring, because it forces an individual to attempt to make sense of the event. In their model they suggest that this is done by a process of deliberate rumination. Their use of the term 'rumination' is concurrent with that as defined by Martin, Tesser, and McIntosh (1993) which they define as a process that involves recurrent event-related thinking, focused on sense-making and problem-solving. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) posited that intrusive rumination soon after a traumatic life event would be a natural part of the healing process but that after the realisation that some previous goals will have to be abandoned or revised, it is necessary to enter into a conscious process of deliberate rumination. This then leads to examination of and reorganisation of existing schemas that are dissonant to the traumatic event, and in the process a new meaning may emerge leading to PTG. Changes were found, that represented benefits arising from the coping process in: openness to new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). As measured by the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, PTG has been found to occur in people with experience of human

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immunodeficiency virus, bereavement, cancer and terrorist attacks (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Engelkemeyer & Marwit, 2008; Ho, Chan, & Ho, 2004; Laufer & Soloman, 2006).

The process proposed to lead to PTG, may be contrasted with a dominant model of post-traumatic stress disorder that indicates that individuals with rigid pre-existing schemas have difficulty assimilating new information about the world with existing information, and this underlies information processing deficits that give rise to a sense of current threat, strong emotions and intrusive rumination, and is characterised by avoidance of those experiences (Foa, Ehlers, Clark, Tolin, & Orsillo, 1999).

Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck (2014) conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between PTG and PTSD and concluded that distress and PTG are independent constructs and that both positive and negative psychological states can co-occur as a response to traumatic events in parallel. Clinically, this indicates the potential to identify growth in individuals undergoing ongoing distress (Shakespeare-Finch & Lurie-Beck, 2014). It has been suggested that greater growth might occur with a greater level of struggle and distress (Wortman, 2004). However, other research has indicated that distress is related to PTG in a curvilinear manner, in that moderate amounts of distress is associated with higher levels of PTG (Kleim & Ehlers, 2009; Laufer & Soloman, 2006). Therefore, too little distress may mean that disruption of schema has not occurred, and too higher a level of distress may mean that growth related cognitive processes are interrupted. Criticisms that apply to the wisdom literature around self-report measures are also relevant

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to those utilised in the PTG literature, such as not being able to adequately capture context.

### **1.6.1 Growth and wisdom in bereavement.**

Although there is limited literature pertaining to wisdom development and utilisation through traumatic or adverse events specifically, there is some evidence to suggest a link between life experiences and wisdom, and therefore spousal bereavement is an experience out of which wisdom may arise and be further developed. Before discussing existing models that might explain the role of wisdom and PTG in spousal bereavement in later life, the bereavement literature will be reviewed.

Early conceptualisations of the grief process suggested that breaking bonds and moving on with life was necessary in order to obtain 'resolution' (Freud, 1917/1961). This notion has more recently been questioned (Neimeyer, 2001). The dominant Kübler-Ross (1969) model of grief was developed with relevance to giving guidance to professionals supporting terminally ill patients and adapted in a later model of grief following bereavement (Kübler-Ross, 2005). In this model an individual is thought to progress through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance in order for 'healthy' recovery to occur. Although commonly criticised for being overly simplistic in suggesting that an individual moves through bereavement in a staged process, Kübler-Ross and Kesser (2014) have more recently suggested that earlier work was frequently misunderstood, and that individuals may not enter all stages, and that individuals progress through the stages in no particular order. Based upon

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clinical experiences and anecdotal evidence, there is limited literature empirically testing the model. Longitudinal studies of bereavement have failed to provide support for a stages model of response to grief (Maciejewski et al., 2007). In that study it was found that in the early stages (within the first month) that the dominant grief response in those who had lost a loved one through natural causes was acceptance. Another study found that when the loss was a result of suicide, or accident, that denial was the dominant response in the early stages. Therefore, suggesting that the grief response is an idiosyncratic, and complex process. Resulting from lack of development in research in this area, many professionals working to support those undergoing bereavement, have been trained in relatively generic approaches to grief (Neimeyer, 2014).

The dual process model of coping with bereavement suggests a cyclical rather than staged approach, in which there is an oscillation between confronting the death of a significant other (loss orientation) and avoiding it, in order to attend gain respite from the grieving process (avoidance orientation; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Caserta, Lund, Utz, and De Vries (2009) have made parallels between this process and the process outlined by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006), in which reorganisation of schema preceding PTG involves a process of rumination / deliberate thinking alongside avoidance in which intrusive thoughts may occur. This may facilitate growth by allowing individuals to process the event in order to find meaning, but also reduces the impact on the individual's ability to engage in aspects of daily life, and potentially allow them to be open to new experiences.

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Bonnano (2000) suggests that historically, literature on bereavement has tended to focus on pathological reactions to loss which defines 'healthy' as being able to reach a state of resolution. He argues that because loss and grief is a normative event within our lives, that bereavement cannot therefore be pathological. Healthcare professionals that overly rely on these models may miss the 'unique' stories of loss experiences (Telford, Kralik & Koch, 2005). Dominant models of bereavement, furthermore have neglected to attend to the potential change that is positive beyond a return to pre-bereavement function, which may limit understanding of the grief reaction.

An alternative view of bereavement has portrayed the experience as being idiosyncratic: the major task being reorganising the life story to maintain continuity between the past and hopes for the future (Neimeyer, 2001). In this view, bereavement is viewed as a challenge to an individual's self-narrative which is made up of the events and themes that allow individuals to make sense of and interpret the past, invest in the present and anticipate the future (Neimeyer, 2001). Gillies and Niemeyer (2006) indicate that through searching for meaning within grief, that individuals can develop new perspectives which may lead to discovering a new purpose in life.

An individual's struggle to reorganise their life after losing a loved one may lead to a more effective level of functioning or a new found sense of strength, appreciation of life and reassessment of priorities (Caserta, Lund, Utz, & de Vries, 2009). In terms of how PTG may manifest in those who are bereaved, Calhoun et al. (2010) presented a model in which it was suggested that individuals may paradoxically see themselves as 'more vulnerable, yet stronger'; through the loss of a loved one, particularly if it was

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unexpected, individuals may experience themselves as developing greater self-confidence and as being stronger, yet more aware of the finitude of life. Secondly, the model suggests that changed relationships such as increased closeness in relationships may occur, which is often experienced as a sense of greater compassion towards others in general. The model also indicates that new possibilities might arise through the changing of roles and responsibilities, and also open up the possibility of new relationships. The model also suggests that a greater appreciation of life may occur in an individual through the realisation that the end of life may be sooner than they think, or that they must make the most of the time that they have left. Furthermore, individuals may experience strengthened or new appreciation of religion or spirituality, due to being faced with issues of mortality and therefore they may be more likely to reflect on questions of an existential nature.

The literature exploring the development of wisdom through adversity, is relatively unexplored. Linley (2003) identified three dimensions which have proposed implications for wisdom as both an outcome and a process resulting from experiencing adversity. The first dimension of 'recognition and management of uncertainty in life', occurs through the shattering of schemas and the realisation that the world is uncertain. Aware of this, individuals are able to manage uncertainty through developing with change, rather than working against it and therefore possessing 'openness to experience'. The second dimension of 'integration of affect and cognition', refers to individuals being aware of their somatic sensations but not being 'at the mercy of them'. The third dimension of 'recognition and acceptance of human limitation',



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refers to a tolerance of the realisation that we have a limited knowledge about the world, including the recognition and acceptance of the finitude of life.

Linley's model of posttraumatic wisdom, draws heavily upon the PTG literature and does not address the extent to which the model fits with existing models of wisdom; there is also little differentiation between aspects of PTG and posttraumatic wisdom, which limits the theoretical coherence of the model. Jayawickreme and Blackie (2016) point out that the model may be compatible with the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm due to the emphasis of recognition of uncertainty, as well as the MORE Life Experience Model due to emphasis on traits such as openness to experience in the development of wisdom. Furthermore, it is not known whether the applicability of the posttraumatic wisdom model to stressful life events that are challenging to the individual but do not lead to the disruption of schema, as is proposed in the literature which Linley's model is based on.

The MORE Life Experience Model of Wisdom may contribute to the understanding of the process of wisdom development through adversity. According to that model, wisdom is seen to arise as a function of psychological capacities that interact with life experiences. It is not known how this manifests in adversity such as spousal bereavement in later life, and what the process of this is.

Nurses working with individuals with terminal illness have described themes of both personal growth and of becoming wiser through the ongoing challenges that occur as part of their role, such as struggling to cope with the

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loss of patients (Vishnersky et al., 2015). Nurses discussed at least one example of growth, with themes being around appreciation of life, new perspectives, greater appreciation of relationships, spiritual / religious growth and personal strength, which is consistent with previous research into PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Themes of wisdom identified were around empathising with others and not being swept up by ones' own emotions, experiencing greater depth of emotion, applying lessons learned from patients, placing value on the moment, admitting mistakes and increasing concern for others. It is possible that the themes were sample specific, as those that are drawn towards the nursing profession may have a particular desire to help others. However, it indicates that both PTG and wisdom may be found in response to challenging life events.

In regards to processes that might be involved in wisdom development through adversity, Webster and colleagues explored the relationship between meaning and wisdom in young adults (18 years – 29 years of age), utilising questionnaires and narrative coding, and found that search for meaning was mildly associated with wisdom, whereas, finding meaning was moderately associated with wisdom (Webster et al., 2018). It is unclear whether finding meaning leads to wisdom or having wisdom allows one to acquire meaning, nor whether there is a third factor or construct linking meaning making and wisdom. According to Webster et al. (2018), it is possible that this is an interdependent process in which meaning making may be a route to wisdom, and wisdom in turn is likely to cause an individual to seek meaning. In a second study, the researchers explored processing styles in response to stressful life experiences. They wanted to know what

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processing styles are associated with people who are nominated as being wise after a stressful life experience; 'exploratory processing' or 'redemptive processing'. The former, referring to whether the individual explored deeper meaning from the event, and the latter referring to whether they had positively framed the emotional meaning of the event over time. They suggested that exploratory processing involves a focus on deriving a lesson from the experience and the latter attempting to see the event in a more positive light. In the study, they found that wisdom was moderately associated with exploratory processing but not associated with redemptive processing.

The above findings share some similarities with the PTG model in terms of the emphasis on deliberate cognitive processing. However, although being proposed to be separate constructs in the literature, the interaction between wisdom and PTG appears to be a complex and potentially dynamic one. PTG, which has been associated with attempts to find meaning, may lead onto wisdom, which in turn has been found to be more strongly related to having found meaning (Webster et al., 2017). PTG may occur through reorganisation of existing schemas, and potentially facilitate wisdom development (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). Although trauma is hypothesised as being necessary for PTG to occur (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), wisdom can occur from both negative and positive life events (Mansfield, McLean, & Lilgendahl, 2010; Webster & Deng, 2015). Wisdom-related events are likely to involve struggling with uncertainty, choices or circumstances, but which are potentially transformative, and have potential to lead to learning lessons about life or about themselves (Bluck & Glück, 2004).

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Jawawickreme and Blackie (2016) furthermore suggest that measures such as the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory may be assessing the process of identifying lessons learned through adversity, which may be fleeting, as they return to their lives after the worst has passed, or that it could be a catalyst for deeper character change when those individuals are determined to live life based on those lessons, as is the case with wisdom. They suggest that wisdom manifests when an individual draws upon a set of 'virtues' that allow them to make good judgements and to act upon this within the boundaries of what is under their control. In a similar vein, Staudinger and Glück (2011) suggest that components of wisdom must manifest into concrete activity rather than only in theory, in that individuals may use wisdom in order to enable them to apply knowledge and judgement to concrete problems faced by themselves and others.

## **1.7 Chapter Summary**

Dominant models of bereavement have largely focused on the negative aspects of losing a spouse, potentially limiting understanding of positive processes that might arise from challenging life events, such as wisdom enhancement. As previously discussed, much research into wisdom in the area of psychology has been concerned with the measurement of wisdom using quantitative measurements. Whilst robust methods have advanced the understanding of wisdom, lack of consensus was found which may be due to differing methods, differing emphasis on domains of wisdom or due to the complexities of wisdom as a multidimensional construct. A further limitation is that quantitative methods miss the meaning, context and

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idiosyncrasies of a deeply personal and individual process. Furthermore, some models that propose the development of wisdom through challenging events are lacking in empirical evidence, or are based upon the PTG literature despite being a seemingly separate construct.

Although it cannot be assumed that all older people are 'wise', they are potentially uniquely able to reflect upon and utilise a life-time of diverse and relevant experiences, and to further build upon wisdom resources. This may have utility for use in adapting therapeutic approaches in Clinical Psychology for older adults.

### **1.8 Rationale for Taking a Grounded Theory Approach**

A constructivist grounded theory approach is a method characterised by obtaining thick description and exploration of meaning, which is well suited to an area of research that is relatively unexplored. As much research in wisdom utilises quantitative methods the approach allows for an exploration of context which will complement the literature and provide a unique contribution. The flexible and iterative approach allows for data collection and analysis to occur in parallel which means that unanticipated themes can be followed up. A strength of the qualitative methods proposed here is that an enriched perspective from participants, not confined by the wording of questionnaire items may present insights into whether and how people identify wisdom as arising from the challenges of spousal bereavement, and what value it has to them.

## **1.9 Gaps in Knowledge**

The original and potentially unique research contribution of the study has been confirmed by a review of the literature that indicates wisdom has not been studied from the perspective of the older person experiencing spousal bereavement. Although studies have explored wisdom narratives across a range of life experiences, none were identified that explored spousal bereavement specifically.

## **1.10 Aims and Research Questions**

The aims and research questions of this study were kept broad in order to explore a range of experiences and to allow for further development of emerging theories. Overall the main aims were to:

Explore the process whereby experienced wisdom arises from the challenges of spousal bereavement, the characteristics of experienced wisdom following spousal bereavement in later life, and the value or impact of this.

The research questions were:

1. What is the process by which experienced wisdom arises from the challenges associated with spousal bereavement in later life?
2. What are the characteristics of experienced wisdom?
3. What value or impact does experienced wisdom have for older people experiencing spousal bereavement?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Chapter Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to present a rationale for the use of constructivist grounded theory and to describe its epistemological position. The methods used will be outlined, which includes: a description of the participants, the study procedure, the interview process, analysis of data and ethical considerations. Issues regarding quality in constructivist grounded theory will also be considered.

### **2.2 Design**

Participants were interviewed about their experiences of wisdom following spousal bereavement, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the process of wisdom development during adversity. Data collection and analysis were guided by the principles of constructivist grounded theory, which is a qualitative approach (Charmaz, 2014). The rationale for this approach will be explained in more below.

#### **2.2.1 Rationale for the qualitative approach.**

Whereas quantitative methods are best suited to answer questions around validity, generalisability, representativeness and of establishing objective knowledge; the central purpose of qualitative approaches is interpretation and understanding of meaning, and the acknowledgment of the subjective elements of the research process (Willig, 2008). The latter therefore being more appropriate to address the aims of the current study which were to explore the process whereby experienced wisdom arises from

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the challenges of spousal bereavement, the characteristics of experienced wisdom following spousal bereavement in later life, and the value or impact of this.

There are various approaches to research that come under the broad term of 'qualitative', such as grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and thematic analysis, which are based upon a range of epistemological assumptions and strategies.

Epistemological stance is the way in which the role of the researcher in the research process is conceptualised, and the assumption around what kinds of knowledge are possible (Maynard, 1994). Madill et al. (2000)

conceptualised epistemological positioning as occurring on a continuum, with naïve realism at one end and radical relativism at the other end. At one extreme of the continuum, there is an assumption that there is a 'truth' to be discovered by an objective observer (naïve realism). At the other end of the continuum, there is a rejection of the notion that there is an objective reality, and instead the assertion that 'truth' exists in relation to context (such as society, and culture) and that all points of view are equally valid. The rationale for choosing one approach over another must take into consideration the compatibility of the epistemological position of the research questions and the methods used to address them (Larkin, 2015).

Furthermore, an approach should be applied in a manner that yields rigorous and valuable findings (Yardley, 2015). Therefore, a further decision was made in regards to which qualitative approach would best meet the needs of the study.



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Grounded theory was thought to be the most appropriate approach for the current study. However, thematic analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis were also considered and this is discussed in further detail below.

### **2.2.2 Grounded theory.**

Grounded theory initially grew out of the response to the view that sociological research was dominantly concerned with theory verification rather than theory generation (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). In contrast to deductive methods, in which data is generated in order to provide evidence for *a priori* assumptions, grounded theory was concerned with inductive reasoning (hypotheses are formed 'bottom up' from the data, through a process of constant comparison of data in which there is 'the discovery of theory from the data'; Glaser & Strauss, 2017, p. 1). It offers a set of strategies that emphasised parallel sampling and constant comparison to refine the findings into categories and which lead to theory construction (Charmaz, 2015).

Grounded theory was further developed to emphasise interpretative-constructivist perspectives that 'social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed' (Charmaz, 2014; p. 13). Therefore, meanings participants ascribe are multiple; within a context (e.g., time, place or situation) and are co-created between the researcher and the participant (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory assumes a relativist, subjectivist position in that it acknowledges 'reality' comes to light through individual interpretation where the researcher cannot be an entirely objective observer (Mills, Bonner

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& Francis, 2006). Within a paradigm that is constructivist, there is an emphasis on the participants' unique perspectives, and their view of reality, which is co-constructed between participant and researcher (Charmaz, 2014). The approach views the researcher's values, beliefs and assumptions as potentially being imposed on the data, and therefore emphasises reflexive methods to counteract this. A reflexive stance is aided through the use of memo writing, keeping a reflective diary and maintaining a curious and critical approach to the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Grounded theory is an interpretative approach that aims to elicit the participants' story and to develop an understanding of their experiences within a specific context. This is done through exploring taken for granted meanings, and seeking thick description, utilising open ended questions that allow participants to take the lead (Charmaz, 2015). Constructivist grounded theory is compatible with the proposed study's research aims which were to construct the meaning, value and acquisition of wisdom which is likely to be an idiosyncratic process, during the experience of spousal bereavement.

A distinguishing feature of grounded theory is the emphasis on the development of explanation of complex processes and the development of theory (Larkin, 2015). This is done through exploring actions and consequences (Willig, 2013). Theoretical sampling is a method which allows the development of theory and involves data being collected and analysed in parallel. This allows the analysis to become more focused, with the aim being that categories are saturated, and a tentative model or theory can be proposed that explains processes within a group. This allows links to be made with clinical practice.

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Grounded theory is relatively flexible in that research aims guide the initial stages of research, but can be adjusted in the light of emerging understandings (Charmaz, 2014). This makes it particularly well suited to more exploratory studies. The open-ended strategies of grounded theory were an important approach to take in the current study, as it allowed the researcher to pursue unanticipated directions, which was crucial given the novel area of research which was pursued. A review of the literature confirmed that this area is relatively unexplored qualitatively.

### **2.2.3 Thematic analysis.**

Thematic analysis was also considered as an approach in the current study. Thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible approach (it can be informed by a number of different epistemological frameworks) and is primarily concerned with constructing patterns and comparing data to identify themes (Smith, 2009).

As the approach is primarily concerned with description, rather than in-depth analysis, and is less suited to understanding in depth individuals' lives within a particular context (Smith, 2009). Furthermore, although thematic analysis involves looking at relationships, this is not emphasised to the extent to which processes could be observed or a theory could be generated. Therefore, this approach was thought to be unsuitable to meet the aims on the study which were to explore the experiences of spousal bereavement and the explanation of processes involved in the development of experienced wisdom.

#### **2.2.4 Interpretative phenomenological analysis.**

An alternative design utilising Interpretative phenomenological analysis was considered (IPA; Smith, 1996). IPA was considered as it would allow in depth and rich insight into experience through an iterative and inductive approach. The approach is informed by phenomenological philosophy in which individual perception is seen as important. Similarly to constructivist grounded theory, IPA involves getting close to the individual's personal world. Allowing the participant to take the lead during the interview process facilitates gathering a rich and nuanced account of an individual's experience. However, IPA tends to favour rich accounts in a small and homogenous sample (Smith, 1996). This is compatible with the approaches roots in idiography (the detailed analysis of particular cases; Smith, 1996). Given the emphasis on idiography and minimal emphasis on the relationship between themes and of making theoretical connections it is likely that the approach may not allow adequate insight into the processes of 'wisdom'. IPA is best placed to explore research questions geared towards understanding the structure of participants' experiences rather than in developing an explanatory theory (Willig, 2013).

Therefore, constructivist grounded theory was concluded as being the most appropriate method to meet the aims of the study which were to explore the process whereby experienced wisdom arises from the challenges of spousal bereavement, the characteristics of experienced wisdom following spousal bereavement in later life, and the value or impact of this. The approach works towards the development of an explanatory model or theory which may have clinical relevance.

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## **2.3 Ethics**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMH) Research Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia. See Appendix A for approval document.

## **2.4 Research Context**

Participants were accessed through the community via local University of the Third Age (U3A) organisations across the East of England. The U3A is an organisation for retired and semi-retired individuals that run group activities and lectures, and allow members to share life experiences and skills. It is classified as a self-help registered charity.

## **2.5 Research Procedures**

### **2.5.1 Development of research questions.**

Grounded Theory is an emergent method, in which understanding develops as events unfold (Charmaz, 2015). The approach is flexible, which is crucial when exploring relatively novel avenues of research; it allows for the altering of research questions 'when you discover that other questions have greater significance in the field' (Charmaz, 2014; p. 27). In initial stages of the research process, the aims were broader, covering wisdom over the lifespan, and concerned with if and how lifespan wisdom was drawn upon during spousal bereavement, and if and how it was changed in the process; as well as the characteristics and value / impact of wisdom. However, participants were more concerned with how wisdom changed following spousal bereavement, and the research questions changed in light of this. It

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became apparent that individuals wanted to talk more in depth about their experiences of the bereavement and not take a lifespan perspective in regards to wisdom. For some, the death of a spouse was one of the most significant and impactful events in their life and this was reflected in narratives which were focused on thoughts, feelings and actions around the time of the death of participants' spouses. As data collection and analysis occurred in parallel, this meant that the interview schedule could be adjusted to reflect the change in research direction and therefore the interviews became more focused on what was most salient to the participant. The initial research questions included: 'how do older people experiencing spousal bereavement draw on past experiences of wisdom?', and this was subsequently dropped, and the interview schedule adjusted to reflect this. As can be seen in the interview schedule in Appendix G, the question 'can you tell me about a time where you felt you were wise?' was adjusted to incorporate 'after the loss of your spouse?'.

### **2.5.2 Sampling.**

As one of the goals of grounded theory is to work towards developing a theory through iterative methods, the sample size could not be anticipated at the outset of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). However, in establishing feasibility of the study in the early stages of research, guidance was considered in which it was indicated that at least 10 participants would be required in order to allow sufficient data to address the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Charmaz, 2014). However, the final number was established in later stages of the research process, and was

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reliant upon reaching 'theoretical sufficiency' (Dey, 1999). Both purposive and theoretical sampling were utilised in the study.

Participants were purposively sampled; participants had experienced spousal bereavement and were self-selected as having developed wisdom. Therefore participants had experience of the phenomenon of interest, within a specific context. A number of inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied.

***Inclusion criteria for entry into the study were as follows:***

- Aged 60 years of age and above. This is in line with the United Nations agreed cut-off for the older population (United Nations, 2017).
- Six months or more post-bereavement (of spouse). As the study was concerned with the process of wisdom development following spousal bereavement it was important that some period had passed between the death of a spouse and participation in the study. There was no upper limit for the period of time post-bereavement, in order to not impose any timeframe on the bereavement process, which is a highly individual experience; if participants self-selected to participate in the study after a long period of time after the death of a spouse there was the indication that the bereavement had some current relevance to that individual.
- Native English speakers ability to speak English at the level of proficiency required for the full communication of project aims and methods, and for the analysis of interview data without the need for translation.
- Having capacity to: understand the aims of the study and the methods involved, provide informed consent for participation in the study, and ability to make an informed decision around withdrawal from the study.

***Participants were excluded on the basis of:***

- Having identified themselves as having mental health difficulties, dementia or mild cognitive impairment that made it difficult to participate in the interview.
- Having identified themselves as having physical health difficulties that prevented them from sitting without discomfort for the duration of the interview.

Theoretical sampling was utilised in later stages to explore and develop emerging categories. This involved making adjustments to the interview schedule in order that the analysis became more focused on codes and categories that appeared to be most salient.

Theoretical sampling of the literature also occurred in order to develop the theory. Glaser (1998) suggests that the literature review should be delayed until after data analysis in order to avoid imposing existing knowledge on the data. However, Thornberg (2012) argues that this risks 'reinventing the wheel', and that researchers should take advantage of existing knowledge, in order to extend, challenge or revise existing theories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) indicate that familiarity of the literature can enhance sensitivity to nuances in the data, stimulate questions about the data and indicate areas for further data collection. This was employed during the development of the interview schedule, which will be discussed in sections to follow. Furthermore, it was used to guide the construction of a grounded theory model of the development of wisdom in spousal bereavement. For instance, Ardel's (2003) conceptualisation of the role of



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reflection as being central to the development of other aspects of wisdom helped to make sense of the data that was emerging.

In qualitative methods, data collection ceases when saturation occurs; this has been defined as the point at which categories are sufficiently dense and no new properties are emerging (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, it has been emphasised that saturation is more likely a goal than a reality: ‘... however, one is constantly alert to emergent perspectives that will change and help develop this theory... so the published word is never the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory.’ (Glaser & Strauss, 2017, p. 40). Proposed as being a more realistic goal is ‘theoretical sufficiency’, which refers to sufficient understanding of the data on which to build a theory, with the acknowledgement that further scrutiny of the data may elicit new insights (Dey, 1999).

A number of steps can be taken to ensure that a study isn’t terminated before theoretical sufficiency has been achieved, which were adopted by the current study. Theoretical sampling can lead more quickly to data that is theoretically appropriate (Morse, 1995). For instance, theoretical sampling ensured that the interviews became more focused as the study progressed; it ensured that any gaps in categories were addressed. Furthermore, the resulting theoretical model should make sense, have no gaps and be coherent (Morse, 1995).

It was judged that theoretical sufficiency was reached in the current study after a sample size of 10. Although a sample size of 10 might be considered to be relatively small for a grounded theory study, it is likely that

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the homogeneity in the sample accelerated saturation. Greater variation within a sample would have led to a greater number of properties within a category and therefore would have required more data to achieve coherence within the model (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

### **2.5.2 Participant characteristics.**

Demographic information obtained from participants is presented in Table 1. In order to protect anonymity all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Ten participants were recruited from local U3A organisations, two were male and eight female. The average age of participants at the time of the interview was 75.6 years (SD = 7.2), with a range of 65-85 years of age. The average length of time that had passed since participants' spouses died was 11 years (SD = 8.15), with a range of 2 years to 25 years.

The U3A is an organisation concerned with personal development and learning. The UK model of the U3A diverges from the original French model as it is not affiliated with universities and does not place an emphasis on high academic achievement (Huang, 2006). The UK model of U3A has existed since 1981, and primarily promotes a member-led group structure with the purpose of teaching and learning for older people, in order to find meaning and insight into their own lives by life review, and for this to be done through reflection and discovery (Formosa, 2014; Huang, 2006).

Despite the inclusive ethos of U3A, lifelong learning has been found to be skewed towards those with a higher socioeconomic status (Jamieson, Miller, & Stafford, 1998). Furthermore, participants were recruited from East Anglia, which has relatively low levels of ethnic diversity (Office For National

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Statistics, 2012). This is reflected in the final sample utilised in the current study; all participants were white British. These factors limit the generalisability of the findings to other groups.

As participation in the study was through self-selection all participants had identified that they were able to talk about experienced wisdom through spousal bereavement.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years since death of spouse</b>
Janine	Female	83	4
Deborah	Female	65	5
Susan	Female	68	7
Linda	Female	67	2
David	Male	69	3
Patricia	Female	77	10
Beverly	Female	80	25
Robert	Male	78	16
Karen	Female	84	20
Laura	Female	85	18

#### **2.5.4 Participant Recruitment.**

##### ***2.5.4.1 Contact with potential participants.***

Potential participants were contacted through the secretary of local U3A organisations. Secretaries of the U3A organisations disseminated the

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study advert (Appendix B) via email to all members, with those meeting inclusion criteria being invited to participate.

On receipt of expressions of interest the participant information sheet (PIS; Appendix C) was sent by email, or by post (if requested) to potential participants. Potential participants were given the opportunity to ask further questions and asked to consider their participation for 24 hours or more before confirming their willingness to participate.

According to the constructivist grounded theory approach, what emerges from the data will affect the number of participants needed for sufficient richness in the data or 'theoretical sufficiency' (Dey, 1999). The approach is also iterative, in that data collection and analysis occur in parallel to allow the researcher the opportunity to follow up any leads that emerge from the data (e.g., by adding questions to future interview schedules), therefore interviews were scheduled 2-3 at a time, with analysis occurring before a further 2-3 scheduled, and so on. Therefore, potential participants after confirming their willingness to participate were informed that their participation would be confirmed within six weeks.

#### **2.5.5 Informed consent.**

Participants were given information around how the data would be collected, processed, stored and destroyed. They were also shown the interview schedule prior to providing written consent to participation. A copy of the consent form is in Appendix D.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study and that if they did so, their data would be destroyed immediately. However,

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they were informed that if they had already completed the interview, they would be given up to two weeks to withdraw their data. The reason for this was because data that has already been analysed has informed and influenced the direction of subsequent interviews.

#### **2.5.6 Confidentiality, anonymity and storage of data.**

Data was processed, stored, and destroyed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (UK Parliament, 1998). Information about how data was planned to be processed, stored and destroyed was given to participants. Interview transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of participants and identifiable demographic information was stored separately from the transcripts. All identifiable data was stored securely, in a locked filing cabinet and password protected computer. In the write up of the results, care was taken to remove any information that might increase the likelihood of participants being identified. Participants were given the choice whether to provide demographic information or not.

#### **2.5.7 Participant wellbeing.**

The potential impact of participating in the study in terms of causing distress was attended to. As participants were shown the interview schedule prior to the interview, they were given the opportunity to discuss any concerns. Any signs of distress prior to, during or after the interview were responded to sensitively by the researcher. A plan of potential options to consider was completed beforehand and considered by an ethics committee, and is outlined in detail in Appendix E, with further debriefing information

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given as relevant (Appendix F). All participants were asked at the end of the interview how they found the content of the interview.

### **2.5.8 Researcher wellbeing.**

The researcher adhered to the University of East Anglia's lone working policies and made use of a buddy system. Participants were visited for interviews during office working hours only.

## **2.6 The Interviews**

Interviews were conducted at the homes of participants, by the researcher. Brief demographic information was also obtained at the time of the interview around age, gender, and how long it has been since they lost their spouse. Interviews lasted no longer than 90 minutes and were audio recorded. Participants were informed that they would be able to request a break at any time or finish the interview at any point.

### **2.6.1 Interview Process**

The interview process involved an intensive interviewing approach, which refers to approaching the interview with a schedule that is applied in a semi-structured manner (with some questions being asked out of sequence), whilst being open to following unanticipated areas of enquiry. The approach allows an interactional space between the researcher and participant, rather than the researcher receiving information passively. From a social constructivist position, the relationship between participant and researcher is seen as being interactive in the research process. Part of this process involved attending to power within the relationship; that is moving towards a

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more equal position. This involved reflecting on the interaction, e.g., how similarities and differences between the researcher and participant impacted on the process. In the current study, the participant was considered as being a co-researcher. Utilising a flexible and semi-structured approach to interviewing also gave participants the space to influence the direction of the interview. Furthermore, rich data was generated through exploring taken for granted meanings, and attending to use of language.

### **2.6.2 Interview schedule.**

An initial interview schedule was created, in order to guide the interview process. Data collection and analysis is an iterative process in constructivist grounded theory. The interview schedule alongside modified interview questions are presented in Appendix G. Prompts were identified, and used flexibly by the researcher in order to explore areas in more depth.

After two interviews it was identified that some questions were not eliciting in-depth responses and so further prompts were added to aid this (e.g., 'What, if anything, have you learned about yourself from previous experiences?'). However, it became apparent after another two interviews that participants were not having difficulty in interpreting the questions but were more concerned with talking about changes in wisdom after the death of their spouse rather than taking a more lifespan perspective of wisdom. Therefore questions were reworded to reflect this. The interview schedule was further adjusted after another three interviews, as being open to new experiences appeared to be salient in the analysis and therefore the interview schedule was adjusted to incorporate this, so that this could be

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explored further (e.g., 'What impact, if any, does being open to new experiences have on your current situation?').

Theoretical sampling of the literature was incorporated into the research procedure. For instance, prior awareness of the MORE Life Experience model (Glück & Bluck; 2013) allowed the researcher in the current study to be more sensitive to aspects of openness to experience as they occurred in the interviews, and this was later incorporated into the interview schedule (Appendix G). A reflective and critical stance was maintained throughout the research process as suggested by Charmaz (2014) in order to ensure that the analysis was grounded in the data and that previous knowledge was not imposed on the data. Memo-writing was also used as a method to explore potential links between prior knowledge and the emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

## **2.7 Data Analysis**

### **2.7.1 Transcription.**

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher shortly after interviews took place. Transcription was labour intensive, and was carried out by the researcher, which allowed immersion in the data. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

### **2.7.2 Approach to analysis.**

Data was analysed shortly after the interviews took place and continued in parallel to further data collection. Further immersion in the data



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was obtained by the researcher reading through each transcript several times to gain an initial impression of the data.

### **2.7.3 Coding and constant comparative method.**

Data analysis in constructivist grounded theory relies on coding, which is a pivotal step between collecting data and explaining a phenomena (Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding involved a process of breaking down segments of data into smaller components with labels descriptive of that data. Initial coding is used to get a sense of what the data is saying and to identify initial themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Later coding became more focused in response to frequent or significant initial codes (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Focused coding involves identifying representative data at a more abstract level than initial coding, which are raised to tentative concepts or categories and when supported by the data, interpretation of the data raises the analytic level and quality of the data (Charmaz, 2008). Examples of coding are presented in Appendix H, and category generation in Appendix I.

Throughout the process, data collection and analysis were completed in parallel, which allowed for adjustment of the data collection phase as necessary. After the first two interviews were coded, a further 1-3 interviews were conducted and analysed, and so on.

Constant comparison methods were used to compare codes with codes, and codes with data, which allowed exploration of similarities and differences within and between interviews. Comparing codes also helps to refine them. The researcher actively sought out data that did not fit with

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codes in order to ascertain gaps in the data, and subsequently adjust the interview schedule in order to develop new lines of enquiry.

Theoretical coding involved exploring codes and categories in order to ascertain how they related to each other as hypotheses in order to develop a theory (Glaser, 1978). Due to time constraints it is acknowledged that the theory does not comprise a full-scale grounded theory, but an abbreviated version. Few studies can claim to be full-scale grounded theories (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sampling in a more substantive grounded theory study would have involved 'returning to the field' to collect further data from existing participants, or from other groups (Willig, 2013). This would be to facilitate greater variation within categories, obtained from maximising differences among groups, and therefore increasing the diversity of the properties of that category for a more comprehensive theoretical model (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

#### **2.7.4 Memo-writing.**

Following each interview, a memo was completed in order to document ideas in progress. These were tentative and exploratory and aided in reflexivity. Memo writing was also used during analysis to stimulate thinking about codes, processes and relationships between codes. An example of memo writing is presented In Appendix J.

### **2.8 Position of Self**

As an area of personal interest, and having completed a literature review prior to conducting the interviews, I was aware that this inevitably brought with it preconceived ideas around the value of wisdom and it's

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relation to experiences. I approached the research process with the assumption that everyone can experience wisdom. I believe that I seek aspects of wisdom in clients, colleagues and myself and am invested in the idea of growth and wisdom coming out of adversity. This perhaps gives me hope and motivation when working with individuals in a clinical capacity, in that you can hear narratives of immense suffering but threads of wisdom and growth can be found. My position is presented in order to facilitate transparency in regards to my own assumptions and values and is done with the intention to demonstrate a commitment to engage in the research process with attendance to self-awareness. The extent to which my values and assumptions impacted on my interpretation and understanding were acknowledged prior to the research process and were revealed throughout the process, and reflected upon during interrogation of the developing codes and categories. Examples of reflective diary extracts are presented in Appendix K.

## **2.9 Quality**

In response to criticism that qualitative studies lack scientific rigor, a number of guidelines exist for reviewing qualitative research (e.g., Elliott et al., 1999; Yardley et al., 2000). It is argued that evaluation criteria should be compatible with epistemological framework, and therefore qualitative research quality should not be assessed by the same criteria as quantitative research (Willig, 2013). The quality of this study will be discussed in sections to follow, making reference to the guidelines set out by Elliott et al. (1999) and how they have been addressed. Consideration of other quality

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standards, integral to the constructivist grounded theory approach are also incorporated into the below.

### **2.9.1 Owning one's perspective.**

According to Elliott et al. (1999), researchers should identify and specify their own assumptions, interests and values and how these impact upon interpretation of data. This allows readers to examine the interpretations in light of these disclosures.

Related to this was the aim to maintain a reflexive stance throughout the research process. Reflexivity involves turning back on ones' life experience (including previous reading) and examine their impact on the research process (McGee, Marland, & Atkinson, 2007). Charmaz (2014) emphasises reflexivity in the researcher in regards to challenging previously taken for granted actions and assumptions, through documentation of the research process, such as through memo writing. Charmaz (2008) suggests that being aware of preconceived ideas might reduce the likelihood of importing them into the data. It was aimed that a reflexive stance would be maintained during coding, categorising and memo writing, by asking questions to open up possible new perspectives. The attendance to reflexivity and explicit documentation can furthermore act as an audit trail and increase transparency for the reader who is then able to evaluate the potential impact of the researcher's biases or assumptions on the data collection and interpretation (Rolfe, 2006). The study achieved this by providing information around the researcher's position prior to the research

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process and how this changed (see end of chapter 4). In addition the inclusion of examples of memo writing, and coding achieved this also.

### **2.9.2 Situating in the sample.**

In order that the reader can adequately judge the range of participants and the situations whereby the findings might be relevant, the researcher should describe participants and their life situation. The current study allows this, by presenting relevant demographic information of participants (e.g., age, gender, and number of years since the loss of a spouse): see Table 1.

### **2.9.3 Grounding in examples.**

In order that readers can judge the level of fit between the researcher's interpretation of the data and the raw data, the process was documented through the memo writing and coding of transcripts and examples. Examples of data illustrating codes and concepts are presented in Chapter 3. The process of transparency within the reporting of the analysis stages also allows the reader to ascertain possible alternative interpretations of the data.

### **2.9.4 Providing credibility checks.**

The researcher discussed a subset of analysed transcripts and emergent interpretations with research supervisors, as a method of providing credibility checks. Participants were asked at the end of each interview whether there was anything that was not discussed in the interview that they felt was relevant. This allowed the researcher to explore whether any topics that had been omitted that may have been salient. Extensive examples

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within Chapter 3 provide the reader with the opportunity to judge the credibility of the analyses.

### **2.9.5 Coherence.**

To demonstrate coherence, an integrated summary of the analyses is presented in Chapter 3, with relationships between codes described both diagrammatically and narratively.

### **2.9.6 Accomplishing general vs specific research tasks.**

Qualitative research should be clear about whether the aim is to provide a general understanding of a phenomena or an understanding of a specific case or instance, and be transparent about the limitations of extending the findings to other contexts or instances. This study represents a sample of older people, based across the East of England having experienced spousal bereavement. The research is not intended to generalise to other groups. Some participant's details are provided in order to provide the reader with information around the applicability or usefulness of applying the findings to other contexts. The limitations of the study are outlined in further detail in Chapter 4.

### **2.9.7 Resonating with readers.**

The final Elliott et al. (1999) guideline, indicates that the research should be presented in a way that stimulates resonance in the reader, and in which the reader is left with an extended appreciation or understanding of the phenomena. An overview of theoretical and clinical context is provided in Chapter 1 that allows the reader to judge whether the findings of the current

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research resonate. Feedback was obtained from the researcher's supervisors around emerging categories.

## **2.10 Summary**

This chapter has described the methods employed in the current study, which has included the rationale for using a constructivist grounded theory approach. It also outlines procedures to ensure the attendance to ethical and quality issues. The following chapter will present the findings of the exploration into the experience of wisdom following spousal bereavement in older people using a constructivist grounded theory approach.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 A Grounded Theory of Wisdom Following Spousal Bereavement**

The analysis of the data, utilising abbreviated constructivist grounded theory methods generated a grounded theory of wisdom following spousal bereavement in later life. Six categories emerged from the interviews: initial impact of loss, triggers (to being open to experiences), being open to experiences, wisdom – learning from experience, positive change, and remaining connected. The latter category emerged later in the analysis and provided the context for participants' experiences. This is consistent with the grounded theory approach in which categories may emerge from the data that were unanticipated (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). In the following sections each category and component sub-categories are presented in turn, with example quotations.<sup>1</sup> A summary table of these is presented in Table 2.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to preserve anonymity all participants have been assigned pseudonyms and all identifiable information has been removed.



Table 2. Categories and associated sub-categories

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Sub-categories</b>
Initial impact of loss	Experiencing multiple losses
	Changing roles
	Emotional impact of loss
Triggers	Receiving encouragement
	Identifying a need
Being open to experiences	Internal experiences
	Novel experiences
	Different perspectives
Wisdom – Learning from experience	Reflecting on perspectives
	Dealing with self
	Having empathy / compassion
	Being tolerant of uncertainty
Positive change	Appreciation of life
	Valuing relationships
	Growing confidence
Remaining connected	

### 3.2 Initial Impact of Loss

Length of time since the death of participants' spouses varied from participant to participant, as did the length of time of illness prior to death. Deborah's husband lived a number of years beyond the initial prognosis, which was longer than was expected, whereas for others the loss was more sudden. Laura's husband died within months of receiving a terminal

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diagnosis, which had been unexpected because he had appeared to be in relatively good health. For Linda, Susan and Deborah there had been an extended period of uncertainty around diagnosis which involved much medical testing. All participants talked about the initial impact of loss with regard to: (b) experiencing multiple losses, (b) changing roles, and (c) emotional impact of loss.

### **3.2.1 Emotional impact of loss.**

Overall for participants, there was an initial feeling of 'shock', either after their spouse received a terminal prognosis, or immediately after the death of their spouse. As Beverly explained, the news of her spouse's health condition was experienced as a watershed moment, in the sense that her life was changed from that moment onwards:

*So that's actually, when you hear that news, that's when you start grieving really- that's anticipatory grief isn't it? Things are going to change, they're going to be different. I used to find... erm... I would be in town or something and your tummy just tipped right over, anxiety, for no reason, it just came on you like that. (Beverly).*

As is exemplified in the above quote, this upheaval was associated with a fear about change and what might happen in the future. Alongside initial shock, some participants described a sense of relief, which indicates a heightened level of distress during the period of illness (e.g., *'I was prepared for it, I definitely was, and it wasn't a shock in many ways... this might not sound right, but was a relief... I think... just that he wasn't suffering anymore.'*; Linda). This was most prominent in the narratives of individuals who had

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cared for their spouses for a prolonged period of time, and witnessed a decline in their health and wellbeing. The extract from Linda hints at her judgement that perhaps this might be an unexpected, or an atypical response in that she felt relief. However, this was echoed by other participants.

Laura felt that in hindsight she was grateful that her spouse had not been unwell for a long period and that his death had been relatively sudden. She suggested that her current perspective impacted on how she remembers the event:

*I tend to look back and think 'I don't remember feeling devastated...'  
because it's all coloured by how it was and how it happened quickly.  
(Laura)*

This indicates the idiosyncratic responses that can occur in response to the death of a spouse, and how this is affected by context and the circumstances of the death (e.g., whether there was a long period of illness). However, all participants reported feeling shock initially, indicating that this had been an impactful and unexpected event for all (whether that be at the time of diagnosis or at the time of death).

Participants also recalled moments of being cut off from emotions, living by the motto '*keep calm and carry on*', feeling numb or as though they were on autopilot shortly after receiving the life changing news. This appeared to allow individuals to carry on as '*normal*' and to meet the demands of daily life:

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*But you are on automatic pilot because you have to do the shopping, washing up, or whatever, and you just carry on. (Linda).*

There was a sense that this was intentional, controlled and in order to 'survive' and be 'self-sufficient'. However, there were also times where emotions were particularly heightened. Participants talked about the reminders of loss, or a moment of realisation of what they had lost. This was particularly felt around married friends, in reaching their own / or what would have been their spouses' milestones (e.g., significant birthdays), or in continuing with activities that had once been shared with their spouse. This is illustrated in the quote below:

*For a long time it quite hurt when I went up for communion in as much as I'd always make a point of going up with [her]. (David)*

Although narratives around grief tended to refer to the initial stages, participants referred to feeling the loss many years later.

*I mean it was such a long while ago that sometimes I feel now as if I never ever was married and at other times, for no reason it feels as though it only happened a few days ago. (Robert)*

Therefore, reactions in the aftermath of a spouse receiving a terminal diagnosis, and after the death of a spouse included feelings of loss, anxieties about the future, relief and being on 'automatic pilot'. These feelings were often combined with feelings of relief that their spouses were no longer suffering with ill health.

### 3.2.2 Experiencing multiple losses.

Many participants recounted other losses that coincided with the death of their spouse. These for some were attributed to getting older. *'The age I'm at, umm... means that people are disappearing fast which does leave me feeling very sad.'* (Karen).

Participants talked about being able to previously rely on their spouses for emotional support through difficult times, and so the absence of their spouse was felt through these challenging times also:

*'He would always have been there to have carried them with me really, any anguish that I had'* (Deborah).

Whereas, other losses were associated with a diminishing social-life either due to no longer *'fitting in'* with married couple friends or linked with the emotional impact of the loss.

*I've got two lots of closest friends, we've got so many plans with them and they've carried on and they're doing everything that we were all going to do together.* (Susan)

The above extract emphasises Susan's difficulty in witnessing her peers fulfilling future goals and milestones. The impact of this on Susan was that she avoided being around peers, and subsequently lost connection to them (e.g., *'I know that I've built up a brick wall around me'*; Susan). This was prominent in the narratives, and emphasises not only the loss of a future with her spouse, but of the friends that were avoided due to painful reminders. It also exemplifies how the emotional impact of loss can also influence behaviour leading to further losses.

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Similarly to feeling left behind, individuals didn't know where they fit socially as a single person *'I don't feel old enough to go with the old ladies eating fish and chips and yet I don't really fit into the social set either because I'm on my own.'* (Janine), therefore indicating further social losses occurring as a result of the death of a spouse.

### **3.2.3 Changing roles.**

Depending on the nature of the relationship prior to their spouses' death, changing roles was experienced to varying degrees. Participants tended to have *'jobs'* that were divided between themselves and their spouses, and having to adjust to this was a particular challenge in the aftermath. Participants talked about knowing what their roles were prior to the death of a spouse and then feeling unsure about new roles taken on.

*When you've got a wife, you know, the wife does these jobs and these jobs and I do other jobs and when you get the whole lot of the jobs lumbered onto you. (Robert)*

Karen talked about a change of role more broadly, and of the uncertainty around the transition from being a wife to a widow, hinting that her husband was a guide to what she *'liked'*.

*Before that you're a wife but that's it... um... so you have a whole lot of learning to do because you don't know what you like and what you don't like. (Karen)*

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In contrast, Linda felt that because she hadn't had strongly differentiated roles with her spouse and that they had not been '*joined at the hip*' that this had less of an impact on her:

*We weren't a joined at the hip couple and the practical side of things, that didn't phase me at all, whereas some people I know their husband does everything, does the garden, and washes the car you know, he didn't do anything like that at all and so I didn't miss him that side, it was the purely the emotional side of it that... er... you miss out.*  
(Linda)

However, she later goes on to recall that he took on the '*reasonable*' role within the relationship in which he tempered her tendency to make impulsive decisions and that this was an adjustment for her.

In summary, participant's described a number of themes in regards to the initial impact of loss around emotional impact, multiple losses and changed roles. However, individuals' responses were highly personal and impacted upon by context such as the relationship they had with their spouses, and the circumstances in which their spouses died. Participant's experiences of loss and fears about the future led to them being open to experiences.

### 3.3 Triggers

The category that was constructed in order to explain the transition that participants made to being open to experiences was 'triggers', which encapsulated: (a) receiving encouragement and (b) identifying a need.

#### 3.3.1 Receiving encouragement.

Being open to experiences appeared to be situated within a social context, in that other individuals could serve to encourage openness. For instance, in the below extract, Karen talked about being taken out of her routine of working hard to avoid difficult emotions by somebody in the community inviting her to join in activities:

*I just worked and worked and worked until I was so tired that I could sleep and that was the same as the first time around... busy cleaning the kitchen until 3 in the morning, at that point, and like I said, that went on for a year and then somebody arrived and said 'why don't you come to bowls at [location]? And I thought 'ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh...' and eventually I gave in and went and from then on once I started getting out, I carried on getting out and everything got easier. (Karen)*

This can be compared to Karen's reaction to similarly being invited to join in a new activity in the context of feeling discouraged:

*A friend of mine was starting up a club down at [location] and er said 'why don't you come?' and I said 'oh yes, let's go', 'what do you want to do that for, it's an old folks game?' [he said] well that was it. (Karen)*



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Robert emphasised that he felt he had permission to be open to new experiences prior to the death of his spouse, which perhaps led him to get involved in activities relatively early on:

*Because you know, she had already told me, don't sit around moping and mourning, get back out there into life. Which I did. (Robert).*

Therefore, after the loss of a spouse, being open to new experiences seems to be influenced by receiving encouragement from others.

### **3.4.2 Identifying a need.**

An additional factor that influenced whether participants were open to new experiences was identifying a need. Although most participants identified themselves as being open to experiences throughout their life, there were times where the need to do so felt more prominent.

Participants identified that when their spouses were alive, that they were content with the '*status quo*'. Linda suggested that she probably would not have got involved in the activities and organisations she has done had her husband not died:

*I think it has made me do more than I would do normally, but I think that's more necessity than- I'm enjoying the things I've joined but... I wouldn't have wanted to do that when he was here, I was quite happy to be here... or whatever we did. (Linda)*

The process of identifying a need, involves thinking about what one has lost and trying to recapture aspects of it. This tended to be around companionship, and social and mental stimulation. Therefore, initially being

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open to experiences was often associated with mixed feelings, for instance the hope that things would improve as well as trepidation about having to encounter further changes. Janine talked about feeling isolated after moving to be closer to her daughter after her spouse had died and identified her need for companionship which led her to learn how to use a computer:

*You know, it's great company because you can keep in touch with people, you can get a lot of information... you can play games on it, you can... The computer is a companion in a way. (Janine)*

Karen identified her need to get involved in new things, after thinking about her aunt who she felt had 'suffered' for many years after the death of her spouse and the image of this motivated her to seek change.

*I had a shining example of an aunt when I was about twelve I suppose, she lost her husband and she sat in the corner until she died, and I thought 'no way would I ever do that' so that was pushing me to get going. (Karen)*

Karen offered a unique perspective because she had experienced spousal bereavement twice in her life. The first time when she was a young parent. She recounted this as another time in which she had been open to new experiences and that this guided her later actions.

In summary, individuals become open to experiences after the loss of their spouse, but this was influenced by receiving encouragement and identifying the need.

### **3.4 Being Open to Experiences**

All participants referred to an increase in openness in terms of: (a) internal experiences, (b) novel experiences, and (c) different perspectives. According to participants' perspectives, this developed gradually after the loss of a spouse and continued to be built upon (e.g., *'I perhaps will consider doing things that I perhaps wouldn't have thought about'; Patricia*). This encapsulated a curiosity about trying new things and of others' values and perspectives, as well as a willingness to experience both negative and positive feelings.

#### **3.4.1 Internal experiences.**

One aspect in which participants' had become more open to experiences in comparison to prior to the death of their spouse was openness to internal experiences, in that they were more open to exploring feelings, not just those around the death of their spouse but more generally. Susan talked about how her level of despair led her to seek out support from professionals and this caused her to face up to and understand difficult emotions that related to the loss of her spouse as well as difficulties that she had encountered earlier on in life such as with regard to the difficult relationship she had had with her mother. Despite the difficulty in doing so, Susan had been on a journey in which she continued to be supported to access her feelings.

*It's like I'm working through another layer each time, when I'm strong enough to face that next layer. (Susan)*

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David echoed the importance of seeking out support. *'But I did find... so much support in various places that I was sensible enough to make the most of it and I still do'*. David accessed support particularly through church and through a bereavement service. He talks about his experiences of being able to show his emotions in the context of this group, and of the importance of this being a reciprocal process:

*I would pour out my story, the tears would pour, no one minded... and then... another time they would... you would listen to them and it would do you a lot of good, great therapy being able and free to talk about it.*  
(David)

Therefore, through support from others, participants were able to explore difficult feelings.

### **3.4.2 Novel experiences.**

The subcategory of being open to novel experiences refers to being curious and being open to trying new things, whether that be a new skill, hobby, or travelling. Novel experiences were highly variable across participants and included leading teaching and/or presenting through the University of the Third Age, travelling abroad, learning to paint, completing an Open University degree and setting up walking groups.

Deborah talked about embracing experiences that had come about through adversity and of not shying away from the challenges associated with it. In the following extract she talks about how it had been planned that her father would *'give away'* her daughter at her wedding but that he had died and she had taken on the role:

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*The daughter's wedding was a very emotional time, erm... her grandad was going to give her away and then he died, so I gave her away, which was absolutely amazing but something that I never ever expected having to do, so therefore did the speeches and all that as well, which again was quite emotional. (Deborah)*

Karen had insight into the importance of making that first step into being open to new experiences (e.g., *'It's all a chain reaction and once you start the chain, life comes up and gives you another opportunity... and as long as you are prepared to do it...' (Karen)*). Therefore emphasising that being open to experiences appears to be self-perpetuating as further opportunities present themselves.

### **3.4.3 Different perspectives.**

Participants revealed in their narratives that they had become more open to different perspectives since the death of their spouse. This was closely linked to novel experiences and emphasised that openness facilitated further openness. Travelling for instance, allowed participants to come into contact with a range of different people.

*Seeing how the other half lives, I like to see what other people do and pinch bits and- you sort of remember bits and bring them back don't you? Not things, but ideas. And get the flavour of different countries and different people cause people are all different aren't they? They're all interesting. (Karen)*

The link between openness to novel experiences and different perspectives is echoed in the followed extract, in which Robert being

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exposed to new interests came into contact with individuals that were different to him.

*Well they've been mainly beneficial, you meet new circles of friends, different ideas- through different things- not hugely different, but slightly different things and it er... keeps your brain going if you get involved with different things, er... and that's extremely good for you.*  
(Robert)

In summary, all participants talked about after a period of time of experiencing the impact of the death of their spouse of being open to internal experiences, novel experiences and different perspectives.

### **3.5 Wisdom – Learning from Experience**

The majority of individuals stated that they did not think that they were 'wise' but all identified circumstances in which they felt that they had developed some aspect of wisdom since the death of their spouse. Individuals varied in respect to how they felt that they had developed wisdom in the areas of: (a) reflecting on perspectives, (b) having empathy / compassion, (d) dealing with self and (d) being tolerant of uncertainty. Aspects of wisdom were similar in that individuals identified that they felt that they had learned from experiences about life and about themselves. For instance, Patricia described wisdom as arising from experiences:

*It's what you've experienced, what you've done, and how you've dealt with it that gives you a certain state of mind as you get older.*  
(Patricia).

The narratives indicated that being open to experiences in the aftermath of the death of a spouse leads to a sense of having wisdom and learning from experiences. Aspects of wisdom appeared to relate to one another, causing a self-enhancing cycle. Furthermore, wisdom was found to reinforce openness to experiences further, therefore creating a dynamic process in which individuals move back and forth between phases.

### **3.5.1 Reflecting on perspectives.**

The majority of participants reported being better able to consider different perspectives. This moves beyond having a curiosity towards how others are different, as was found in the being open to experiences phase, and towards trying to understand peoples' points of view and using this to guide interactions or behaviour. Janine talks about being better able to put herself in other peoples' shoes, and to take their perspectives:

*Other people's views and other people's behaviour- I can see both sides of an argument better than I used to I think. Yes [long pause], yes... I think... yes I think just whatever you've been through in life you, you take a bit of it and use it. (Janine)*

The above extract indicates that Janine felt better equipped to understand the motivations of others, linking this to experiences throughout her life, which led her to be more 'tolerant' of others. This is supported by Robert's perspective that wisdom is accumulated through experiences.

*People can tell you about things but it's no substitute for actually experiencing it for yourself... and then having had an experience you know a bit more about what life is all about and you er... and you can*

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*apply it to various situations and not allow yourself to get too uptight if people don't agree with what you think should be done and you think 'ok, well they think differently. Well we don't all think the same'. Maybe years ago I would have thought 'why don't they think... this is what we should be doing'. (Robert)*

The above extract illustrates that having an appreciation of the differences in perspectives has caused Robert to become calmer and more flexible in the face of disagreements with others, which is likely to have implications for his relationship with others. This is echoed by Linda:

*I have always been very opinionated and headstrong and it's got me into a lot of trouble sometimes and I think over the years, I have learned to think 'well wait a minute, that person's entitled to think what they think, and maybe if I listen to them, I would change my mind'. (Linda)*

Furthermore, not only does she suggest that she is more tolerant towards others, but this perspective also allows her to question her own beliefs, thereby integrating others' perspectives with her own, in comparison to being 'headstrong' in the past. She goes on to partially attribute this to the volunteer work she had been engaged in since the death of her spouse, which involved working on a panel that made decisions about funding and how being exposed to differing perspectives has allowed her to take a more reflective approach in decision making.

*Everybody starts talking and then you think 'oh, I never thought that' or 'I didn't look at it that way' and you can have your mind completely*



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*changed and I think that is showing wisdom, if you like. That you can... have that- can change your mind, let other people influence you, and you are not right all the time. (Linda)*

The above also suggests a change in perspective in which Linda became more appreciative of the potential limitations to her own knowledge and the potential to learn from others and that this was gained by others sharing their thoughts with her.

Patricia noted that her current situation allowed her to reflect on the past and to take a lesson from this:

*Well I think hindsight's a wonderful thing but I can understand now, when after my mother died, I mean my father only lived for another 7 or 8 months- 6 or 7 months I think... I understand now why he felt lonely and at the time I used to think "oh, well dad, you've got somebody coming in to do this and you're going to the daycentre for that, and I come and see you 2 or 3 times a week and my sister comes to see you. You shouldn't feel lonely". But I understand how he felt now, I've learned empathy from that, which I suppose you can apply to different situations. (Patricia)*

This extract also emphasises the close link between aspects of wisdom reported by participants, in that reflecting on others' perspectives has allowed Patricia to have a better understanding and empathy for others. It was only through experiencing those feelings herself that she was able to gain perspective on how her dad might have been feeling.

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### **3.5.2 Dealing with self.**

Through dealing with adversity, participants reported feeling better able to manage their own emotions. For Janine, this was about learning to motivate herself when going through a bad patch and to not get overwhelmed by emotion:

*I've learned since that I've been through all those bad times and now nothing phases me too much, you know what I mean, I know how to deal with myself... when I feel down I know how to deal with it... I can have a bad patch but I can say "right, now get on with life". (Janine)*

Beverly talked about being able to manage her responses and interactions in relationships.

*'oh it's this that and the other' and I think 'what?...' so that's a bit of I'm right and he's in the wrong, you know and that's a hard lesson to learn and to think 'well...' you know, you don't go down that road, and yeah... erm... I think it's all about learning about yourself even when you're 80, I mean we change as time goes on, we're not the same people as we were as teenagers or... yeah. (Beverly)*

For Beverly, being wise is about being able to walk away from argument, knowing that it could have a negative impact on the relationship. Therefore the subcategory of 'dealing with self' entailed not being controlled by ones' emotions, e.g., being able to meet ones' goals in the presence of difficult emotions as well as being able to not act upon strong emotions.

### **3.5.1 Having empathy / compassion.**

The majority of participants emphasised increased empathy and compassion towards others as a consequence of experiencing spousal bereavement, such a willingness to understand how others are feeling, whilst being open to others as being likely to be having their own unique response. All participants were actively involved in charity or community work in which the emphasis was on helping others. Susan for instance identified that many of her friends who had been bereaved found Saturdays particularly difficult and she set up a meditation group on this day to meet this need. Participants linked increased empathy and compassion for others with being more socially active, and having been open to internal experiences. David wanted to connect with others in order to help, and related this to his own experiences of being supported by others during the bereavement group he had attended:

*It's not so much what you say to them, it's being there to listen to them which is the greatest help... and so many examples of people who said nothing, but at the right time in the right place, just the hug or the touch has meant everything. (David)*

Robert echoed that his experiences of losing a spouse allowed him to support others going through a bereavement:

*Particularly with one thing I've found from [her] dying it gave me the ability to talk to other people who were going through the same circumstances as I was whereas beforehand, I wouldn't have known what to say... having been there... you can talk to them. (Robert)*

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Susan linked her empathy not only to the loss of her husband but due to experiencing many losses in her life, which she attributed to being open to experiences throughout her life, not just in the aftermath of the death of her spouse:

*We've always been involved in numerous groups, all sorts of different things. My husband was Action Man, so we were doing all sorts of outdoor things and in groups and societies and then on the spiritual level there was a whole lot and so we've had contact with far more people than you normally would, so consequently, you're gonna have a lot more deaths in your life....and so death has been a massive part of my life really, and loss, so I'm guessing it kind of equips you to help other people along the way. (Susan)*

Therefore, being open to experiences can lead individuals to be exposed to the negatives as well as the positives in life, which as suggested by Susan lead to learning to have greater empathy for others.

#### **3.5.4 Being tolerant of uncertainty.**

Although less substantial in the interviews, (i.e., fewer participants talked about it in comparison to other aspects of wisdom), acceptance of the uncertainties of life was identified as resulting from experiences in general, rather than those associated with the challenges of losing a spouse. In the extract below, Robert talks about how his perspective has changed through reflecting on challenging events in his past such as difficult career decisions.

*You can only base your actions and decisions on the sort of information you have... if you don't have the full information,*

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*something else turns up that was completely unexpected, there's nothing you can do about it, all you can say is 'well, I acted to the best of my ability based on the information that I had...' If it went completely pear-shaped at the end because something totally unexpected cropped up, there's nothing I could have done about it, just remember next time, that you need to be aware that something may go different to what you think. (Robert)*

Having such a perspective may buffer against harbouring regrets, and Robert's acceptance of uncertainty may mean that adversity may have less of a destabilising impact on him. This notion is supported in the following extract:

*I suppose, wisdom, knowledge, it allows you to handle to majority of situations you're likely to come across, from previous experience and smooths the path of a lot of things, you don't get too surprised about the way things happen. (Robert)*

Therefore, this suggests that there is an interaction between tolerating uncertainty and the subcategory of dealing with self, in that the former allows one to approach situations in a calmer way.

Linda additionally in the below extract demonstrates how her experiences have given her greater insight into the complexities of life, and an appreciation of the contradictions of life (e.g., lessons can be extracted from life events that may seem devastating).

*I think you have to have experiences... good and bad, and bad experiences to make you realise how lucky you are and how good life*

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*really is... and I think that that just changes you as you go on through life. (Linda)*

Participants also talked about an increased awareness of and engagement in thoughts of their own mortality in the aftermath of the death of a spouse, and in subsequent losses. This is different from being open to internal experiences and accepting both positive and negative feelings, but also entails deep contemplation about life, and ones' purpose in life and how to derive meaning from it.

*It concentrates your mind on your own mortality when that happens. Before that, you don't think that much about dying, it wasn't really anything we ever really discussed... very much, except we used to say "well if you go first, or if I go first, we'll do so and so and so and so...". (Janine)*

For Janine, this wasn't something she had thought about in depth until her spouse died and she faced the discomfort of becoming aware of her own mortality. This process allowed Janine to reassess her goals and to guide her actions accordingly. For Janine it was important to '*experience things you might have missed out on*' (Janine).

This also exemplifies how wisdom can then lead onto being more open to experiences. Therefore, the above extracts have indicated the bi-directional link between wisdom and being open to experiences.

In summary, all participants described instances in which they felt that they had gained wisdom after the death of a spouse. There was a strong association between being open to new experiences and of being exposed to

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different perspectives and individuals that allowed participants to develop a sense of learning from experience.

### **3.6 Positive Change**

Paradoxically, despite the challenges associated with the death of a spouse, positive change was prominent amongst most interviews as a result of being open to experiences and wisdom- learning from experience. This is illustrated in the following extract from a poem that Susan had written and wanted to share during the interview:

*‘Even when falling to the ground with all the dross weighing down,  
new growth happens...’ (Susan).*

All participants described at least one domain within which they had experienced a sense of positive change which included (a) appreciation of life, (b) valuing relationships, and (c) growing confidence.

#### **3.6.1 Appreciation of life.**

Participants emphasised the value that they placed on their life, and hinted at increased thinking about their own mortality underlying this, and of wanting to make the most out of the time that they had left. *‘I’ve got a little motto over my computer that says, um... “don’t regret growing older it’s a privilege denied to many” which is very true’ (Janine).* This demonstrates the link between wisdom and positive change.

Others emphasised a change in priorities away from the accumulation of money (e.g., *I’m quite happy with myself, erm... and I’m not, I’m not as interested in finance as I perhaps used to be; Robert*)

### **3.6.2 Valuing relationships.**

Related to changed priorities, the following quote suggests Deborah's increased awareness of the uncertainty of the future and her focus changing towards the present and in building memories with her grandchildren:

*So live for the day really and yeah, that's what I've done and that's why we do lots of exciting things, so there's memories, its building memories basically. (Deborah)*

Participants talked about having a greater appreciation of their relationships as a result of the support that they received. Linda talked about her concern that friends that had been there to support her at the beginning might not stick around. In the below extract Linda described feeling secure in the relationships as a result of them 'sticking around'.

*That just surrounded me. They were there for the two years, I mean it wasn't like they just arrived when he'd died, they had been through it all with me and... still are, so I don't know really how I would have coped without them. (Linda)*

For Laura, it was the mutual support between herself and her children through a shared loss that led to her having a closer relationship to them.

*It really did make a terrific difference to the relationship between myself and my son and my daughter because we all were talking about the same thing and they were supporting very much, but I was supporting them because they had lost their dad. (Laura)*



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This demonstrates that Laura's openness to mutual support provided a new context for the relationship she had with her children. Laura went on to talk about how her relationship with her son in particular continued to grow in closeness many years after the death of her spouse.

### **3.6.3 Growing confidence.**

Most participants talked about gaining a new found sense of being able to overcome obstacles, whether that be overcoming the challenges of learning a new skill, meeting new people or gaining a sense of being able to cope with potential adversity in the future. Robert suggested that being open to new experiences was anxiety provoking initially but that overcoming this was what allowed him to pursue other experiences, therefore facilitating further openness. This therefore demonstrates a relationship between two of the categories in which being open to experiences had a bidirectional and reinforcing relationship with positive change.

*You've got to get outside, get in the car, and go and join in with things and it becomes easier, at first, it was a bit nerve wracking, being amongst a load of people you don't know, but it does generally become easier because you look back and say 'well, yes I joined so and so, and I didn't know anyone, but now I do and so I can do the same here'. (Robert)*

Linda on the other hand felt that being able to cope with the death of her husband gave her a sense that she would be able to get through any adversity that the future may hold.

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*The worst thing that could happen to me in my life was [him] dying and so nothing can compare with that. If I can deal with that, I can deal with anything. And that has actually given me a bit of confidence because... well, what can't I do? I might not like it, or I might make a mess of it, but I will survive, if you know what I mean? I'm not going to crumble and fall... Not if I've got through that. (Linda)*

In the following quote, Linda indicates that this perspective allows her to be open to negative experiences, and that she is able to learn about her capabilities through it:

*Bring it on, you know, what's going to happen next because so much has happened over the past few years that you just think, yeah ok, let's just see if I can deal with that then. (Linda)*

Patricia found it particularly challenging taking on new roles and found that mastering new skills gave her a new sense of confidence that she could tackle challenges in the future.

*I mean I'd been with my husband over there but I hadn't driven over there on my own... erm... and looking back, it was those sort of milestones of things that I could do that I think gave me confidence, I think to do things in the future. (Patricia)*

There was a development of a sense of self-sufficiency, in that individuals grew to accept their new life living alone:

*I have grown to accept my own space, my own life, I've grown in my own life. (Deborah)*

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Alternatively, Laura suggested that because she had always maintained a relative independence from her husband that she had a strong sense of self-sufficiency. She suggested that this had been important during the bereavement.

*I was always fairly strong in doing things, and we always had, and this is why I think it's always important with women to have things that they don't always do with their husbands. (Laura)*

In summary, although faced with multiple losses, changed roles and the emotional impact of loss, paradoxically, individuals derived a new found sense of having gone through a positive transformation, through being open to experiences and through wisdom.

### **3.7 Remaining Connected**

Remaining connected has a unique place in the generation of the theory in Figure 1. It indicates that bereavement is not a state but an ongoing process that interacts with the process of developing openness, wisdom and positive change. Through the changes that occurred in individual's lives, they deliberately remained connected through a number of ways. David quoted a passage from a hymn that struck a particular chord with him about the way he felt towards his spouse:

*'For love is stronger than death, a lover's passion is as jealous as the grave, it bursts into flame and roars like a searing hot blaze, oceans of water cannot put it out, whole rivers cannot quench its light, love is stronger than death'. And that I believe. (David)*

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This therefore illustrates the perspective that many participants shared that although their spouse had died, that they were kept 'alive' by remaining connected. Linda felt accompanied by her spouse on her journey to becoming wiser by reflecting on the perspectives and actions that her spouse had demonstrated in their relationship:

*I suppose just, when you've been together so long, I automatically think 'what would [he] say, or what would [he] think, or what would [he] want me to do?' you know, that kind of thing, so I don't feel alone... erm... that's not actually true, I never feel lonely, but I sometimes do feel alone... but that's more a physical thing, you know? You just think 'oh, I'm here on my own' kind of thing... but mentally, I still think he is around me and kind of support- that is a support to me. (Linda)*

Linda alluded to becoming more like her spouse who she had considered to take on the 'reasonable' role in the relationship. In remaining connected to her spouse, this allowed her to feel some sense of security and comfort whilst her life changed.

### **3.8 Grounded Theory**

The theory about the possibilities of wisdom development that has emerged from the data provided by ten people who have experienced a bereavement is presented in Figure 1. This theory is a contextual model outlining how one may be able to understand the conditions that may engender the development of wisdom. The characterisation of wisdom is informed by theory (e.g., Ardelt, 2003; Baltes & Smith, 2008; Glück & Bluck, 2013; Webster, 2007) through theoretical sampling of the literature but not

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constrained by it; it is enriched and guided by the data that emerged in the analysis above and of participants' own conceptualisations of wisdom. In the figure, each box presents a category, and arrows depict the proposed relationship between categories. It was found that the development of being open to experiences, wisdom- learning from experience and positive change was not linear and that this was an interactive process with a strong emphasis on openness to experiences. Six main categories were identified: initial impact of loss, triggers, being open to experiences, wisdom – learning from experience, positive change, and remaining connected. As can be seen in the diagram, the development of wisdom was found to be a process in which the initial impact of loss was followed by a conscious engagement in openness. This led onto wisdom and positive change which further served to encourage openness, thereby creating a dynamic and reinforcing cycle. The initial impact of loss varied across participants. Interacting with this process was participants' remaining connected to their spouse through the changes that occurred.

### **3.7 Summary**

In summary, being open to experiences seems to be important in the development of wisdom. After being faced with challenges associated with the death of a spouse, participants developed a sense of positive change and wisdom, the latter in regards to learning to reflect on different perspectives, being better able to deal with emotions, having greater empathy and compassionate concern for others and tolerating uncertainty. Positive change and wisdom then influenced openness further, as individuals

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felt a greater sense of being able to deal with the potential ups and downs of being open.

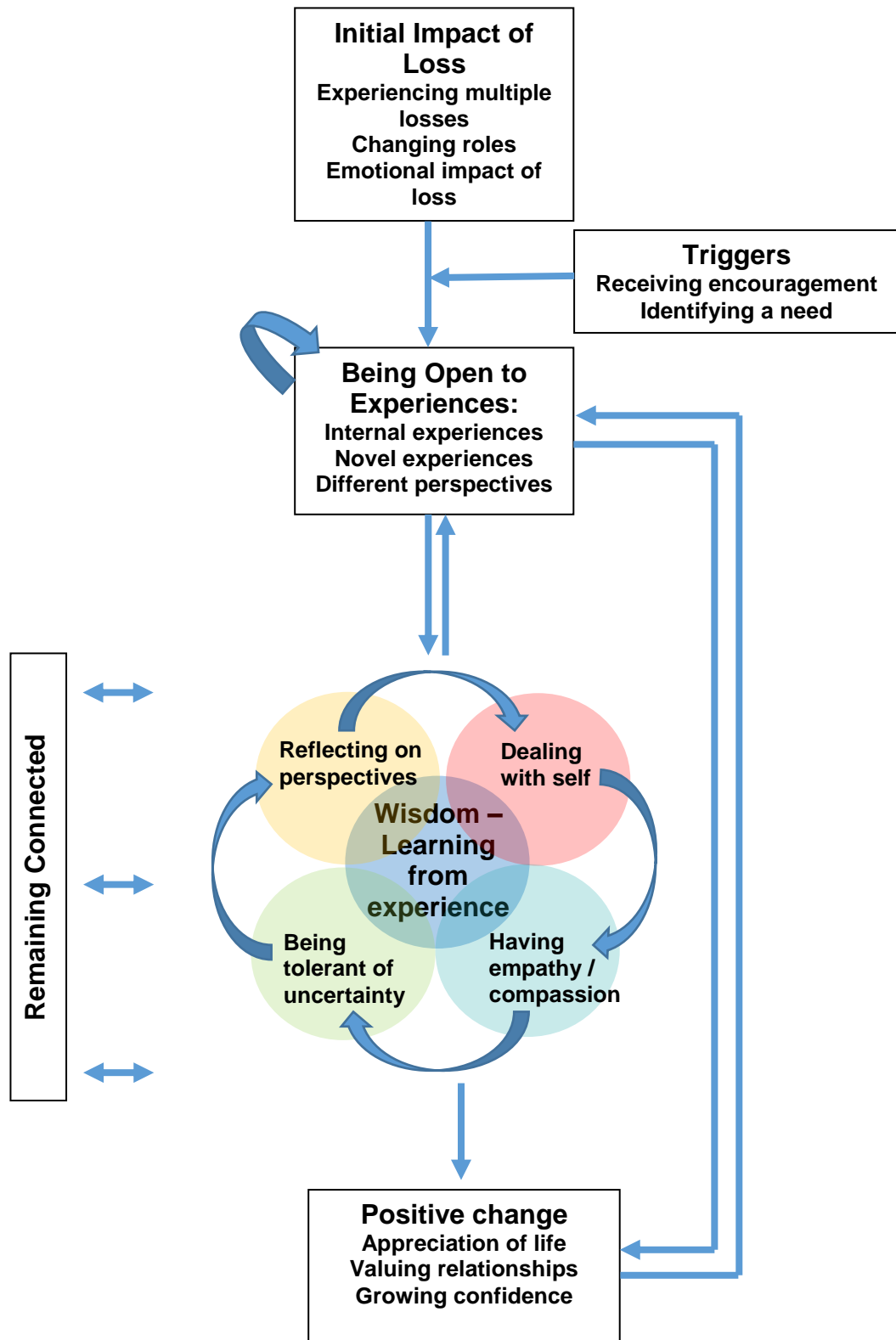


Figure 1. A grounded theory of wisdom development following spousal bereavement in later life.

The presentation of the category of 'wisdom-learning from experience' is adapted from Ardelt, Achenbaum, and Oh (2013) in order to depict the relationship between different aspects of wisdom found in participants.

#### **4. Discussion**

The current study aimed to explore the experience of wisdom attainment following an adverse life event, in this instance, spousal bereavement in later life. A model of wisdom development (see figure 1) following spousal bereavement emerged from interviews with ten men and women who had lost a spouse, and in which openness to experience was found to be associated with both wisdom and positive change. Triggering events for individuals to move towards being open included being encouraged by others and identifying the need. Wisdom as characterised by learning from experience, also had an influence on positive change. Both wisdom and positive change were likely to reinforce being open to experiences further, creating an iterative and dynamic process that led to further openness and therefore opportunities to develop wisdom and obtain a sense of having benefitted from the experience. Participants also reported deliberately maintaining a connection with their spouse, even many years later.

The overall aims of this study were to develop a greater understanding of the process whereby wisdom arises from spousal bereavement in later life, to investigate the characteristics of experienced wisdom and to explore the value or impact of this. The extent to which these aims were addressed will be discussed in turn in this chapter alongside the existing literature. In addition, strengths, clinical implications, limitations and future directions will also be discussed.



#### **4.1 Wisdom Arising from Spousal Bereavement**

One of the study's aims was to develop an understanding of the processes involved in the development of wisdom after spousal bereavement. The initial impact of the loss tended to involve a multifaceted range of emotions and reactions, and these appeared to be impacted by the premorbid nature of the relationship between the study participant and their spouse. Additionally, the circumstances around the death, such as whether the spouse had a prolonged period of ill health prior to dying were also important in terms of emotional experience and meaning drawn. The experiences of the participants in the current study emphasises the very personal nature and uniqueness of grief responses. There were many responses to grief in this current study and that by no means captures the range that is possible.

Being open to experiences appeared to be important in the development of both wisdom and positive change, via increased exposure to new experiences and perspectives in the domains of: internal experiences, novel experiences, and different perspectives. Participants talked about the initial months being dominated by being faced with the distress and realisation of what they had lost, with periods of avoiding in order to complete daily tasks, which is consistent with the dual process model of bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

The majority of participants alluded to being open to experiences prior to the death of their spouse. Some shared this characteristic with their spouse and continued this, however, others felt that they acted upon this

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more after the death of a spouse due to factors such as being encouraged by others, and identifying a need. Participants perhaps lacking confidence found that initially accessing new activities could be supported by others, and other participants talked about identifying that their life was lacking something such as social contact or intellectual stimulation. Engagement appeared to not be easy, and involved a deliberate process that involved overcoming anxieties, but that this got easier with time and that one opportunity often led onto another.

The MORE Life Experience model places strong emphasis on the role of experiences, in that experiences such as spousal bereavement act as a catalyst for wisdom development but only in those that are already high in certain characteristics (i.e., Mastery, Openness to experiences, Reflectivity, and Emotion regulation and empathy; Glück & Bluck, 2013). For instance, the five resources interact with life experiences to enhance wisdom over time, creating a “positive syndrome” (Westrate & Glück, 2017). Although there is lack of clarity in that model in regards to what constitutes wisdom, the authors describe openness to experiences as involving being interested in seeking out different perspectives, and the inclination to try new activities and visit new places. Individuals who are open to experiences may be more likely to develop wisdom because they are more likely to seek out wisdom fostering experiences. In their model they suggest that emotion regulation is involved in receptiveness to emotional experiences and reflectivity is concerned with willingness to learn, and curiosity. In the current model, these were found to be more closely aligned to the category of being open to experiences rather than aspects of wisdom. The other aspect of the MORE

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model (mastery) is represented in the current study in terms of positive change and will be addressed in more detail in the following sections. The results in the current study fit with the MORE model in that being open to experiences following spousal bereavement allows for the development of a sense of experienced wisdom.

Webster's (2007) model of wisdom also emphasised life experience and openness, alongside emotional regulation, reminiscence / reflection and humour. However, similarly to Glück and Bluck (2013), they conceptualise this as being concerned with being open to the full range of emotions, positive and negative, which also appears to be more closely aligned to being open to internal experiences in the current study. The relevance of other domains in Webster's (2007) model (humour and reminiscence / reflection) will also be discussed in sections to follow.

Narratives of wisdom as a result of spousal bereavement were all linked to being open to experiences. In allowing difficult feelings, exploring these with others, and being open to novel experiences and perspectives, participants derived a sense of learning about themselves, their resources and abilities (these included: reflecting on different perspectives, dealing with self, having empathy / compassion and being tolerant of uncertainty).

MORE resources may allow an individual to deal with difficult life events as they occur and depending on the type of challenge, different resources may be of particular relevance (Glück & Bluck, 2013). For instance, the authors posit that openness may help an individual to adapt to a changed situation. Being open to experiences may be particularly salient

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for participants in the study as it encapsulates a curious and flexible approach to life, which would have more relevance given the sense of upheaval that participants reported experiencing in terms of change of roles and multiple losses. Participants' lives were changed as a result of the loss of a spouse, and being open to experiences acted as a vehicle whereby individuals were able to conceive of and act upon methods to improve their quality of life.

Increased being open to experiences may mean that an individual is likely to encounter more negative events than those individuals less open to experiences. For instance, one participant stated that being more open, and consequently having many individuals in her life, meant that she also experienced a greater number of losses. Therefore, experiencing challenges that potentially exposed her to more opportunities to develop wisdom.

Being open to experiences, not only appeared to be facilitative of wisdom and positive change in the current study but also appeared to be self-facilitative, in that individuals suggested that once an opportunity was pursued that further opportunities presented themselves.

Remaining connected was a category that emerged from the interviews, that arose spontaneously, in that participants weren't specifically asked about this, but this appeared to have particular importance for participants. Participants talked about reflecting on what their spouses would do in certain scenarios and maintained connection through learning about their spouse through conversations with others. This was something that participants felt gave them comfort, and allowed them to feel pride in the

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ways in which they had developed and appeared to interact with the process of gaining wisdom and positive change through being open to experiences.

This was present in all participants, despite it being many years since the death of a spouse in some individuals. This is in contrast to earlier views that suggest that it was necessary for the breaking of bonds in order for healthy recovery to occur (Freud, 1917/1961). In contrast, bereaved individuals can turn to a deceased person for guidance and for comfort derived from reminiscence (Stroebe, Schut & Boener, 2010).

Therefore, in the current study, there appears to be a dynamic and cyclical process in which resources and capacities are further built upon and may be encouraged or discouraged depending on social context and identifying the need to be more open to experiences. This is similar to conceptualisations of the development and enhancement of wisdom, and the resources associated with it (Ardelt, 2003; Westrate & Glück 2017). For instance, there is no end point to the development of wisdom, rather it is a continuously developing process.

## **4.2 Characteristics of Wisdom – Learning from Experience**

Another study aim was to identify the characteristics of wisdom arising from spousal bereavement. There are a number of conceptualisations of wisdom, with varying degrees of emphasis on affective, reflective and cognitive dimensions. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach allowed for the discovery of aspects of wisdom particularly pertinent to individuals currently going through the challenging event of spousal bereavement. In this study participants defined wisdom as learning from life

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experiences and identified an increase in experienced wisdom in the areas of reflecting on perspectives, dealing with self, having empathy / compassion and having tolerance of uncertainty. All participants identified a sense of gained wisdom in at least one of these domains. Less common was for participants to report increased wisdom across all sub-categories. The aspects of wisdom derived from the narratives in this study corresponded well to the domains as outlined in the three dimensional model of wisdom which indicates that wisdom consists of reflective, affective, and cognitive domains that are conceptually distinct but interact with one another (Ardelt, 2003). The fit of this model with the three dimensional model will be discussed in the below sections. Other dominant and relevant models will also be integrated into the discussion.

#### **4.2.1 Reflecting on perspectives.**

Reflecting on perspectives allowed individuals to take a step back or to incorporate others' perspectives in making decisions, and being better able to understand others responses. This appears to correspond well to the reflection domain of the three dimensional model of wisdom (Ardelt, 2003). For instance, in that model, reflective aspects of wisdom are described as being concerned with being able to look at phenomena from different perspectives, and involving having self-insight.

#### **4.2.2 Dealing with self.**

Here, 'dealing with self' also appears to correspond well to the reflective domain of the three dimensional model (Ardelt, 2003). Participants in this study reported being better able to manage their responses to others,

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being better able to not become overwhelmed by difficult emotions as well as being able to continue towards their goals in the presence of distress.

Emotional experiences have been found to improve with increasing age (Carstensen et al., 2000). Therefore, older people may have greater contact with life experiences and therefore obtain the opportunity to grow in this domain.

Glück and Bluck, (2013) suggest that being reflective is a prerequisite that is developed on the way to becoming wise rather than a characteristic of wisdom. However, according to Ardelt (2003), reflective capacities do constitute aspects of wisdom but that wisdom capacities do not build in parallel, but in an iterative manner in which there is unequal emphasis on affective, reflection and cognitive domains. Ardelt (2003) suggests that the most crucial element of wisdom is the reflective dimension as this has an impact on the development of the affective and cognitive dimensions. This is perhaps why some aspects of wisdom reported in this study had greater prevalence amongst participants than did other elements of wisdom (e.g., reflecting on perspectives). There was also some evidence to suggest that strengths in aspects of reflective wisdom laid the foundation to other aspects (e.g., having empathy / compassion).

There is also some relevance here to the model as outlined by Webster (2007) particularly in regard to reflective aspects of wisdom. Their definition of reflection is slightly different to the Ardelt definition, in that they propose that this involves connecting the past with the present. This seemed to be present in the narratives in the current study, in that participants referred to 'hindsight' frequently and seeing things differently from their

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current position than they did in the past, for instance in the sense that being better able to take on others' perspectives allows them to reflect back on how they handled situations or in order to understand others behaviours. This is likely to have repercussions for participants' relationships alongside dealing with self, which may then manifest in valuing relationships.

Reflection in the sense suggested by Webster is likely to relate to how one integrates events that occur in their life into their narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). It is feasible that participants would be able to integrate aspects of experienced wisdom into their sense of identity. Participants frequently suggested that they had not thought about themselves as being 'wise' but suggested that the interview had afforded them the opportunity to reflect back on experiences in order to elicit experienced wisdom. Therefore the interview itself may have provided the context for the co-construction of notions of personal wisdom that individuals could then integrate into their sense of identity.

As previously mentioned, experiences have been emphasised in the development of wisdom, and therefore individuals open to experiences are presumably exposed to more wisdom developing opportunities (Glück & Bluck, 2013). However, having experiences isn't enough to develop wisdom and in order to gain wisdom from an event, insight must be gained from it (Staudinger, 2001). Therefore emphasising that reflection is key in the development of wisdom.

Webster's (2007) conceptualisation of wisdom diverges from the other models stated here, due to the inclusion of humour as a domain and is



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included here as it may have some relevance to 'dealing with self'. Humour was proposed as allowing an individual to recognise life's ironies as well as reflecting a positive kind of detachment from stressful situations (Webster, 2007). Although not identified in this study as an area in which individuals had explicitly grown in regards to wisdom, and not included in the analysis, there was some evidence of this in the narratives, for instance in how individuals recounted information, which included pointing out the irony of difficult situations. However, this did not constitute participants' notions of experienced wisdom.

#### **4.2.3 Having empathy / compassion.**

Having Empathy / compassion corresponded well to the affective domain of the three dimensional model of wisdom, which concerns having empathy and compassion towards others (Ardelt, 2003). Participants integrated their own experiences with a compassionate concern for others, which allowed them to support others. The majority of participants cited examples of feeling better able to empathise with others and wanting to alleviate suffering in others. They related this to having been through similar experiences, whilst acknowledging individual differences in responses.

#### **4.2.4 Being tolerant of uncertainty.**

Tolerance of uncertainty, involved being able to accept the uncertainties of life, and being able to manage unpredictability in a calm fashion. Tolerance of uncertainty was less prevalent in the narratives, but is likely to correspond to Ardel's conceptualisation of cognitive domains of wisdom which entails being able to view reality accurately and how this

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relates to intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of life (Ardelt, 2007).

Tolerance of uncertainty also has relevance to the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm of which one criteria is knowledge about the uncertainties of life, which is concerned with how one manages the unpredictability of life (Baltes & Smith, 2008). Participants cited examples in which they were accepting of the knowledge of their own mortality and the uncertainties of life, and of thinking deeply about this and using it as a guide as to what opportunities they wanted to pursue. Doing so might buffer against having regrets in the later stages of life for not pursuing opportunities in the past. Furthermore, participants talked about having a general tolerance of uncertainty that allowed them to not feel too surprised if things didn't go according to plan, potentially allowing individuals to not become too destabilised in the presence of adversity. This is perhaps in line with the notion that one of the major tasks of later life is being able to accept the reality of ones' own mortality and not regretting missed opportunities (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1994). Lack of prevalence of more cognitive elements of wisdom may have been due to the relative low numbers of males in the sample, who were found to place more emphasis on cognitive aspects of wisdom (Glück & Bluck, 2013). However, as discussed above, this may be an aspect of wisdom that emerges later, after other aspects have developed (e.g., reflective capacities).

The other domains of the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm were less present in the narratives (value relativism, procedural knowledge, factual knowledge, and lifespan contextualism; Baltes & Smith, 1998). Although value relativism, which concerns acknowledging there are differences in individual, cultural

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and societal values may have some relevance to the subcategory of 'reflecting on perspectives'. It may be that lifespan contextualism, factual knowledge and procedural knowledge were less relevant to the experience of spousal bereavement. However, the methods used in the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm involved coding responses to case vignettes to hypothetical scenarios, which may have been more conducive to eliciting aspects of general wisdom rather than personal wisdom (e.g., individuals were not asked about their own experiences), and therefore may elicit less emotionally salient responses. Given that individuals described wisdom through the personal experience of spousal bereavement, it is unsurprising that conceptualisations of personal wisdom appear to be most relevant.

#### **4.3 Value / Impact of Experienced Wisdom**

The final aim of the study was to explore the impact or value that wisdom has for older people following spousal bereavement. Positive change seemed to arise from both wisdom and through being open to experiences, despite the losses associated with spousal bereavement. Domains of positive change included: appreciation of life, valuing relationships and growing confidence.

As might be expected, some aspects of positive change reported by participants appeared to correspond to aspects of PTG as asserted by Calhoun et al. (2010) as being relevant to spousal bereavement. By far, the most dominant aspect of positive change was in growing confidence. Participants talked about feeling better equipped to deal with future challenges as a result of developed wisdom, as well as feeling a sense of

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pride at being able to develop new skills, make new friends or take on new roles that being open afforded them. This may be similar to the PTG model's conception of personal strength (Calhoun et al., 2010). For instance, mastering new activities and roles, perhaps led to deriving a sense of being able to cope with challenges that the future may hold. Along with being more open to experiences, there was the sense that participants were less fearful about the future in contrast to the initial impact of the death of a spouse. For instance, they had coped with what they believed was the worst thing that could happen with them. This may also share some similarities to the MORE model idea of mastery which refers to meeting challenges head on and being adaptable to change. According to Glück and Bluck (2013), mastery is important in the development of wisdom because individuals will be more open to change and less fearful of the unknown. This fits in well with the current model which suggests that growing confidence was not only cited as a positive change, but would likely facilitate greater engagement in being open to experiences, which then in turn may facilitate the growth of wisdom.

Also consistent with the PTG model (Calhoun et al., 2010) is the reported changes in relationships in this study as exemplified in 'valuing relationships'. Both valuing relationships and the PTG model emphasise increased closeness in relationships. The PTG model's new possibilities domain may share some similarities with the category of being open to new experiences, however in the current study this was conceptualised as a route to positive change rather than an outcome of bereavement. In the current study being open to experiences appeared to be present in participants prior

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to the death of a spouse in varying degrees and this was triggered by factors such as receiving encouragement and identifying a need in the current study.

In the study it was being open to internal experiences, novel experiences, and different perspectives that allowed individuals to derive positive change and wisdom. The sub-category of appreciation of life also mapped onto one of the PTG domains. According to Calhoun et al. (2010) the death of a loved one may cause an increased appreciation of life due to the realisation that life may end sooner than they think. This was supported in the study, as individuals talked about wanting to make the most of the time they had left and in some instances this was linked to deep contemplation about ones' own mortality and ones' purpose in life, as was seen in the subcategory tolerance of uncertainty. Appreciation of life in this study also arose from the enjoyment of new experiences.

Although participants talked about the importance of religion and spirituality in their coping, they did not report a change in terms of this, although they reported that they felt supported by their peers associated with church. It may have been that their beliefs had already been well established prior to the death of their spouse and therefore they did not experience growth in this area. When individuals did talk about changes in regards to this, it was encapsulated by valuing relationships, in that individuals for instance valued the support that had been offered by peers in the church.

Participants reported feeling 'shock' at the diagnosis and death of a spouse, and recounted the event as being a watershed moment. This may indicate that spousal bereavement may cause a disruption of assumptions

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around stability and safety in later life, and therefore it is conceivable that some aspects of post-traumatic growth were found in participants (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). However, it is not possible to ascertain whether participants did indeed experience the bereavement as a trauma (i.e., an event that led to the reorganisation of schema; e.g., Calhoun et al., 2010).

Positive change not only arose as a positive outcome of being open to experiences and of wisdom, but was likely to reinforce the cycle further. The results emphasise the complex and dynamic relationship between being open to experiences, wisdom and positive change that appear to overlap with existing conceptualisations of wisdom and PTG and associated traits. This may account for the difficulty in the literature of conceptualising clearly the differences between the constructs of wisdom, PTG and associated characteristics. However, it points to the particular relevance of being open to experiences following spousal bereavement in later life. It is possible that if another sample were interviewed that the relative emphasis on these domains would vary however. Therefore wisdom, positive change and openness to experiences may be context dependent.

#### **4.4 Clinical implications**

The current study emphasises the potential benefit of exploring being open to experiences in the development of wisdom, or how talking about wisdom can lead to the co-construction of narratives around wisdom. These were elicited alongside narratives of suffering and distress which indicates a potential to explore wisdom clinically.

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Although participants talked about not thinking about themselves as being wise, all were able to elicit examples of being wise after the death of a spouse. This challenges notions of wisdom as being lofty and unattainable and indicates an approach in which aspects of wisdom are more prevalent, to a lesser or greater degree (Ardelt, Achenbaum & Oh, 2014). Calhoun et al. (2010) outline the expert companionship approach in which those working with people who are bereaved may work with an individual to identify aspects of PTG. However, the authors caution against minimisation of the distress that comes along with bereavement and the importance of allowing for more complex reactions to loss. Laidlaw (2013) furthermore, has emphasised the potential benefits of identifying and enhancing wisdom when working clinically with older people with anxiety and depression, through encouraging individuals to use their past experiences to help them deal with current difficulties.

#### **4.5 Strengths and Limitations**

As far as the author is aware, this is the first study to explore the links between wisdom development and adversity, specifically spousal bereavement in later life. It begins to address some gaps that were evident in the literature in regards to how wisdom might be derived from difficult life experiences.

Due to the social constructionist perspectives employed in the study, the aim was not to obtain an objective measurement of wisdom per se. Therefore the approach does not allow generalisations to be made to the wider population. The sample size was also relatively small and

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homogenous, which limits the transferability of the findings. The study included mostly women, potentially reflecting the higher proportion of widowed females in later life (Office For National Statistics, 2017). However, this is considered to be a limitation, as men tend to be under-represented in the literature exploring spousal bereavement.

It is also important to consider the social environment of the University of Third Age organisation whose ethos is around personal development and learning, and that all participants were members of the organisation. Therefore, it is possible that participation in the organisation promoted the development of wisdom, which may limit the generalisability of the model to other groups. Furthermore, participants were primarily invited to participate in the study through email. This along with participants being required to self-select may mean that participants in the study potentially over-represented individuals that were open to experiences.

There was a variation in the sample in terms of time since the death of a spouse, as well as variation in the nature of illness preceding death. This variation may have resulted in a more comprehensive overview of the process. However, it is acknowledged that the current study did not constitute a full-scale grounded theory; and a more comprehensive grounded theory may have been achieved through increasing variation further through the recruitment of other groups (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). However, this was not feasible given the time constraints of a doctoral thesis.

Whilst this grounded theory offers some insights into the role of wisdom in spousal bereavement, it cannot ascertain cause and effect in



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terms of whether traits of wisdom allow individuals to draw positive change from challenging life events or whether the adversity itself acts as a catalyst. As identified by participants, current stance and context has an impact on how events are remembered. It is also not possible to ascertain whether the changes occurred because of the challenges associated with the bereavement or due to other factors. Furthermore, retrospective accounts may limit the extent to which a robust theory can be developed that would inform affective interventions.

#### **4.6 Further Research**

Further research would benefit from including a larger, more heterogeneous sample, which would allow further elaboration on differences between individual's experiences and allow further exploration of relevant factors. This would aid the exploration of the therapeutic processes that would be helpful. Quantitative exploration of a potential mediating role of being open to experiences may provide insight into how individuals derive a sense of wisdom from spousal bereavement.

Although the current study offered some insight into the process of wisdom development following spousal bereavement in later life, a longitudinal study would perhaps allow more insight into how being open to experiences, and wisdom emerge over time.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, utilising a constructivist grounded theory approach allowed for the emergence of aspects of being open to experiences, wisdom,

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and positive change following spousal bereavement. The approach highlighted the complex and dynamic relationship between these constructs. Additionally, participants reported wanting to remain connected to their spouses throughout the process. Future longitudinal work might provide more insight into when these constructs emerge over time. Interventions based upon a validated model of the development of wisdom following spousal bereavement may be applied to individuals struggling with the loss of a spouse. However, the results emphasise that positive outcomes such as wisdom and positive change might arise in the presence of profound distress and the importance of attending to identifying and building strengths (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

**Final Reflection:** *The research process has been a learning opportunity that has challenged some of the assumptions I had previously held. I was surprised at the centrality of being open to experiences in the narratives and that it was this that provided the context for wisdom to develop, although I had expected elements of wisdom to be present. I have become more aware of the challenges faced by individuals going through spousal bereavement which can be far reaching and have implications for social and emotional wellbeing, but also I was struck by the ways in which individuals strived to change their lives for the better despite trepidation. I was touched by how this seemed to be a journey which participants wanted to take with their spouses, attempting to remain connected along the way. I believe that this will be useful in my career as a Clinical Psychologist in encouraging discussions around which narratives of experienced wisdom may be elicited, whilst also allowing the space to explore distress and the varying ways in which this may manifest. I believe this approach will allow me to approach my work with greater optimism. I also have valued the potential to learn from participants, and have a greater appreciation for how we can learn from our clients.*

*Through utilising an approach to research that I was unfamiliar with, I learned that I was perhaps less comfortable with the flexible nature of the approach and lack of clear parameters, but also found that in the discomfort of this my skills and confidence as a researcher has grown, and leave the research process with greater curiosity about the development of wisdom than when I started.*

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## Appendices

### ***Appendix A. Ethical Approval Document***



Clare Webb  
MED

Research & Enterprise Services  
Floor 1, The Registry  
University of East Anglia  
Norwich Research Park  
Norwich, NR4 7TJ

Telephone: +44 (0) 1603 591490  
Email: [fmh.ethics@uea.ac.uk](mailto:fmh.ethics@uea.ac.uk)

Web: [www.uea.ac.uk/researchandenterprise](http://www.uea.ac.uk/researchandenterprise)

19/7/17

Dear Clare,

**Title: An exploration into how older people make use of wisdom as a resource during spousal bereavement, and how wisdom is changed by the experience**

**Reference: 2016/17 - 90**

The amendments to your above proposal has been considered by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee and we can confirm that your proposal has been approved.

Please could you ensure that any further amendments to either the protocol or documents submitted are notified to us in advance and also that any adverse events which occur during your project are reported to the Committee. Please could you also arrange to send us a report once your project is completed.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M J Wilkinson', is written over a horizontal line.

Professor M J Wilkinson  
Chair  
FMH Research Ethics Committee

**Appendix B. Study Advert**



We are looking for participants to take part in a study, exploring wisdom as a personal resource during the challenging life event of losing a spouse. Experiencing bereavement of a spouse later in life is sadly a common experience. We are interested in the value of wisdom to older people and their experiences of wisdom.

We are also interested in how wisdom is changed by or developed through life experiences. We think that anyone can have wisdom and that all people's views on what it is to them is valid.

**Are you:**

60+ years of age?

Fluent in English?

Someone who has lost a spouse longer than 6 months ago? There is no upper limit for the period of time that has passed.

Available for an interview that will last no longer than 90 minutes?

If so, and if you would like more information, please contact me on the below details:

Clare Webb:

Tel. 07388 548 091

Email. [clare.webb@uea.ac.uk](mailto:clare.webb@uea.ac.uk)

In leaving your contact details, you are giving consent for those details to be held on the study database. Your details will not be shared with anyone outside of the study team and will be removed from the database if you do not take part in the study, and will not be kept for longer than is necessary if you do take part in the study.

## **Appendix C. Participant Information Sheet**



### **An exploration into how older people make use of wisdom as a resource during spousal bereavement, and how wisdom is changed by the experience**

You are being invited to take part in a study looking into how wisdom develops over the lifespan and how this is used to manage challenging life events such as losing a spouse. We are interested in the value of wisdom to older people and their experience of wisdom. We think anyone can have wisdom and that all people's views on what wisdom is to them is valid.

Before you decide if you would like to take part, it is important that you understand why the study is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and talk to others if you wish to. You will be able to speak to the main researcher either over the telephone or in person. They will go through this sheet with you and answer any questions you have.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

Experiencing bereavement of a spouse in later life, is sadly a common experience. In the past, research has looked at how difficult life events have affected people in negative ways. However, people have found that along with this, they can experience personal growth such as in wisdom. The aim of the study is to find out older people's experiences of this by asking them questions.

#### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

We are interested in hearing about the experiences of people aged 60+ years of age.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

You do not have to take part in the study and at any point during the study you are free to withdraw, up until 2 weeks after the interview has taken place. This is because individual responses cannot be easily removed once analysed and made anonymous.

#### **What will happen if I choose to take part?**

If you decide to take part you can contact me (Clare Webb, Trainee Clinical Psychologist) using the contact details at the bottom of this information sheet. You will be given the opportunity to ask any questions or to discuss any concerns you might have.

Prior to taking part in the study you will be asked to provide brief demographic information (gender, age bracket, time since losing your spouse and dominant career). Your anonymity will not be compromised and this information will be stored securely. You will also be asked if you have a

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mental health difficulty, or have been diagnosed with dementia or cognitive impairment that might make it difficult for you to complete the interview.

We anticipate that in order to answer our research question, we will need a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20 participants. Due to the nature of the study being exploratory, we will not know how much data we need, and from who (based upon the demographic information provided) until we have started collecting it. Therefore, once you have decided that you would like to take part in the study, your participation in the study will be confirmed within 20 weeks. If you do not participate in the study, all information obtained from you will be destroyed at the end of this 20 week period. If your participation is confirmed, a time will be arranged for me to meet with you to complete the consent form and to complete the interview.

The interview will be semi-structured, which means that I will have a schedule of some questions I would like to ask. However, you will be invited to tell me about anything else that you think is important. You will be shown the interview schedule before the interview and given the opportunity to talk about any issues. Interviews will last up to 90 minutes, but can be stopped by you at any point, or a break can be taken. The interview will take place at a location convenient to you.

**What are the benefits of the research?**

We hope to contribute to knowledge around experiences of bereavement and the value of wisdom. You may like the opportunity to share your experiences. This will be written up anonymously and disseminated to a wider audience.

**Will my information be kept safe?**

The interview will be audio recorded. This recording will be kept on a password protected computer. After transcription of the audio recordings, the audio recordings will be destroyed. All transcriptions will be made anonymous and any information that could lead to your identification will be removed.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of the study will be written up as part of my Doctoral thesis and may also be submitted to an academic journal for publication. When the study is completed, I will be able to offer you some information about what was found and the details of any publications.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research study is being organised by Clare Webb, Professor Ken Laidlaw, and Dr Paul Fisher, who are part of the Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Programme at the UEA School of Medicine.

**What support will be offered to me afterwards?**

Although the research is oriented towards positive coping and wisdom, it is understandable that for some the topic might bring up difficult memories or feelings. This will be discussed before the interview takes place, and you will

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be shown the interview schedule. You will be given the opportunity to discuss whether you think it will trigger feelings of distress and given the choice to not be asked certain questions.

You will also be given the opportunity to discuss this after the interview and you will be supported to access further support should you feel this is right for you. We will be able to discuss whether or not you wish to stop the interview or withdraw from the study.

**What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should call 07388 548 091 and ask to speak to Clare Webb, or contact the research supervisors, Professor Ken Laidlaw on 01603 593600 or Dr Paul Fisher on 01603 593084.

**Contact details**

Clare Webb, Trainee Clinical Psychologist:  
clare.webb@uea.ac.uk  
Tel: 07388 548 091 (study phone number).



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**Appendix D. Participant Consent form**



**Participant ID:** \_\_\_\_\_ (to be completed by researcher)

**Study Title: An exploration into how older people make use of wisdom as a resource during spousal bereavement, and how wisdom is changed by the experience**

**Chief Investigator:** Clare Webb

Please initial box

I confirm that I have been given a copy of the participant information sheet (version X) for the above study, which I have read.

☐

I was given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss any concerns with the chief investigator.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

☐

I understand that all information collected as part of the study will be treated as completely confidential and that relevant sections of data collected during the study may be looked at by individuals from the University of East Anglia. I give permission to these individuals to have access to my data which will be anonymised.

☐

I understand that any audio recordings and records will be kept in a password-protected computer or encrypted memory stick and in a locked cabinet and will only be accessible to relevant research staff.

☐

I understand that the study will involve one session that will involve an interview at [ ] lasting up to 90 minutes.

☐

I have had the boundaries of confidentiality explained to me and understand the circumstances in which confidentiality may be broken (for instance if there is a risk to myself or others).

☐

Do experiences make us wise? An exploration of spousal bereavement in later life.

I agree to take part in the above study

☐

Name of participant

Date

Signature

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---

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Name of researcher

Date

Signature

---

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Once the consent form is signed by both the participant & the researcher, 1 copy will be posted back to participant and 1 (the original) will be kept in a confidential research file.

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### ***Appendix E. Responding to Signs of Distress***

During and after the interview, the researcher will use their clinical skills (as a Trainee Clinical Psychologist) to assess and respond to signs of distress, sensitively. If participants become distressed during the interview, the following options will be discussed and considered:

- a) Continue the interview after a break and debrief / discussion around how they are feeling.
- b) Discontinue interview after break and debrief / discussion around how they are feeling.
- c) Discontinue the interview.

The following options will also be discussed and considered in combination with the above:

- d) Signposted to relevant third sector organisations
- e) Offer to contact their GP.

All participants will be asked at the end of the interview how they found the content of the interview. If the participant reports that they the interview has caused distress, or that they think they may later become distressed, the above options (d-e) will be discussed and considered.

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## ***Appendix F. Debriefing Information***



Thank you very much for your time in working with me on this piece of research. As part of the debriefing process, you will be given the opportunity to talk about any difficult memories, or feelings, or anything else that may have come up for you during the interview. It will be discussed with you, if you need any ongoing support.

Sometimes, talking about difficult life experiences can bring up difficult memories or feelings later on, after the interview has ended and you may want to talk to someone.

### **Contact details for further support:**

#### **The Cruse Bereavement Care**

Freephone National Helpline is staffed by trained bereavement volunteers, who offer emotional support to anyone affected by bereavement. The helpline is open Monday-Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when we're open until 8pm.

Contact details:

Tel. **0808 808 1677**

Email. **[helpline@cruse.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cruse.org.uk)**

#### **The Samaritans**

Freephone, helpline offering emotional support to anyone in distress. The helpline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Contact details:

Tel. **116 123**

Email. **[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)**

## **Appendix G. Interview Schedule**



Initial schedule

Adjustment to schedule during the process

- Can you tell me about your interest in the study (prompts: you told me that you lost your spouse [time since they lost their spouse] ago - I wonder if that was a difficult time for you? What happened? How did you feel? What, if anything, helped?)
- In what ways, if any, has the loss of your spouse changed you, and how you think and act? (prompt: has your perspective changed? *Has your relationship with yourself and / or relationships with others changed?*)
- *What, if anything, have you learned about yourself through your experience of losing a spouse?*
- *What impact, if any, does being open to new experiences have on your current situation?*
- What thoughts do you have about wisdom? (prompt: how does one act and think when they are being wise?)
- Can you tell me about a time where you felt you were wise *after the loss of your spouse?* (prompt: What did this look like? What did you choose to do in the situation? What were the outcomes? What impact did this have on your life?)
- What *life* experiences, if any, did you draw upon to help, *after losing your spouse*, and / or you in your current situation? (prompts: *what, if*

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anything, have you learned about yourself from previous experiences? How did you apply these lessons after first losing your spouse, and / or in your current situation?)

- What does wisdom mean for you right now? (prompts: what value or impact, if any does personal wisdom have for you in your current situation?)
- In what ways, if any, does your participation in the study allow you the opportunity to reflect upon past life experience and the value to you?
- Do you have any other thoughts on what we have been discussing?

## Appendix H. Example of Coding

‘Patricia’			Page #
	Initial Coding	Focussed Coding	
<p>1 C I wondered if you could tell me about your interest in</p> <p>2 the <u>study</u>? You lost your spouse 10 ½ years ago-</p> <p>3 P 10 ½ years ago, and <u>erm</u>... I just happened to see</p> <p>4 the email from the U3A and I thought well... because</p> <p>5 it seemed different I thought it might be quite</p> <p>6 interesting to take part, <u>erm</u>... I don't know if the</p> <p>7 outcome would help anyone else in a similar position</p> <p>8 as me but it might help people- Clinical</p> <p>9 Psychologists for example... it may help them in</p> <p>10 their work I don't know, but it might do... so yeah,</p> <p>11 I'm just interested. I like to know what's going on in</p> <p>12 the world and I thought this was an interesting thing.</p> <p>13 C Can you tell me a bit about when you lost your</p> <p>14 <u>husband</u>?</p> <p>15 P <u>Erm</u>... what the circumstances?</p> <p>16 C What did you feel at the time?</p> <p>17 P How I felt? Well it was a bit of a- it couldn't have</p> <p>18 been the same sort of shock as somebody for</p> <p>19 example who loses a spouse, from a sudden heart</p> <p>20 attack or road accident or very, very quickly. My</p> <p>21 husband... he'd had a bit of a, bit of a history of</p> <p>22 infections. Eventually I said to him 'I think you need</p> <p>23 a second opinion'. He had a second opinion and he</p> <p>24 was diagnosed in December and died in March, so it</p> <p>25 wasn't a very long period of time to sort of even</p> <p>26 adjust and to be perfectly honest, the indications at</p> <p>27 the hospital were that 'yes, it was going to be</p> <p>28 <u>terminal</u> but probably not as quickly as it was. I fully</p>	<p>Being interested in doing something different</p> <p>Wanting to help others</p> <p>Being curious about what's going on in the world</p> <p>Making comparisons to death in terms of time- Being in a state of shock</p> <p>Seeking second opinion</p> <p>Not having time to adjust</p> <p>Not being prepared</p>	<p>Being open to new experiences</p> <p>Wanting to help</p> <p>Initial impact - being in shock</p> <p>Importance of time in being able to adjust</p>	

'Patricia'		
<p>29 expected he would go on another year or so, but he 30 didn't, erm... and I think... I think it was a shock for 31 both of us, obviously. Not a good shock, and erm... 32 my daughter at that time was working with I don't 33 know if you know the pharmaceutical company 34 [company]? She was working with them at the time 35 and she asked around and she found the name of a 36 very good erm... consultant at [hospital]. We went to 37 [another hospital] erm... and then we managed to 38 get to see this consultant at [hospital] and he was 39 quite positive, and erm... we were living very 40 hopefully at that point. That was from January to well 41 to March, til two or three days until he died and erm 42 we were very hopeful, very positive, erm... and so 43 when he actually died very quickly over a weekend, 44 that actually came as a bit of a shock... yeah... so 45 you know I think it... I've heard people say before 46 that... you perhaps don't know what way to turn 47 immediately but then you have to sort of grit your 48 teeth and get on with it and er... that's what I did 49 really.</p> <p>50 C Can you tell me more about what you mean by 51 erm... getting on with it? 52 P Erm... well I knew nothing would bring him back, the 53 only person who could help me was me, so I 54 decided... the thing that helped me most was 55 keeping busy... I just did lots and lots of things. I 56 mean there was a funeral to arrange, etc... and then 57 afterwards paperwork, letters to write, I joined- well</p>	<p>Being shocked at speed of decline</p> <p>Seeking out good care Living with hope- being positive</p> <p>Being shocked by speed of death Listening to other people - not knowing where to turn for support</p> <p>Getting on with things</p> <p>Knowing that he wasn't coming back- keeping busy as a way to cope</p>	<p>Being shocked</p> <p>Hope quickly turning into loss – shock</p> <p>Others have gone through it</p> <p>Being alone in it 'Gritting teeth' – Being busy to cope</p>



‘Patricia’		
58 several months after, I joined various things, like 59 U3A, erm... and I just kept very, very busy... and for 60 me, it might not suit everybody, but for me, that was 61 the way that I sort of coped in the early stages. 62 C What was the outcome of keeping busy? 63 P Erm... I suppose... probably stops you thinking... 64 you know, there were other things to think about and 65 er... I can remember lying in bed one night thinking 66 there's nobody else, I'm going to have to do it all for 67 myself and er that's what I did I suppose, yes... 68 and... I think as you- by keeping busy that early time 69 when it feels really raw sort of gradually diminished. 70 Whether it was a good thing I don't know, I don't 71 know, but that's what I did anyway [laughs]. 72 C What do you mean by diminished? 73 D Well I think at first you're a bit shell-shocked, and 74 then you get to a point where you don't feel good 75 about things, you know, you feel really down, er... 76 but as I said previously, the only person that could 77 get me out of that was me. I've got some good 78 friends, and it was very good, but you still come 79 through the door on your own at night you know? It's 80 nice when they're helpful, and er... but you still have 81 a lot of time on your own to think, but I think, well as 82 times gone by- it's 10 years ago now, erm... you've 83 just got through it I suppose, yes. 84 C Is there anything else that was helpful for you in 85 those initial stages? 86 P In the early times? Erm... well as I said, my friends	Joining groups to cope  Questioning coping – own way of coping  Keeping busy as a way to avoid thinking  Realising that there was nobody else	Keeping busy to cope          Self-reliant in coping Pushing self          Reflecting on having got through it

‘Patricia’		
<p>87 were particularly good. Erm, [long pause] I suppose I  88 got little targets, things that I had to do on my own,  89 which I'd never done before, and I thought 'oh I can  90 do this, I have to do this', for example, I had never  91 driven to my daughter's on my own and she at that  92 point lived in [location], and I thought 'if I don't drive  93 down there, I'm not going to see her', and with great  94 trepidation I set off, went round the M25 and I got  95 there, and I was literally petrified, but I did it and  96 having done that, I thought 'well...'. I've a friend who  97 invited me over, they live the other side of [location].  98 I hadn't driven over there on my own. I mean I'd  99 been with my husband over there but I hadn't driven  100 over there on my own... erm... and looking back, it  101 was those sort of milestones of things that I could do  102 that I think gave me confidence, I think to do things  103 in the future. That's all I can say really, I can't think  104 that there is anything else particularly that's helpful.  105 In what ways, if any, has the loss of your husband  106 changed you?  107 C Well... [laughs] I think it's... it's made me more  108 resilient because I have to do- I make my own  109 decisions now, I've got nobody to talk it through with.  110 Erm... I think it gives you more confidence. I... erm...  111 yes, I've certainly done- not actually public speaking  112 but I have had to stand up in front of a group fairly  113 regularly and speak, which I wouldn't have been...  114 well... I used to teach and it's very different from  115 teaching a class of children, than talking to adults,</p>	<p>Setting self challenges</p> <p>Telling self that she is able to do new things</p> <p>Feeling that need to drive out of necessity – to keep connection with daughter</p> <p>Overcoming fears</p> <p>Doing things for the first time- emphasis on doing it alone</p> <p>Feeling more confident</p>	<p>Pushing self</p> <p>Learning able to overcome fears</p> <p>Having more confidence – having done something new</p>

‘Patricia’		
116 but I've done that and so it's given me the 117 confidence to do that... erm... I've certainly had to 118 make decisions, for example, concerning where I 119 live, the house, the bungalow... erm... and I've done 120 it fairly confidently I think, so I should think to 121 summarise, it's given me a lot more confidence, a lot 122 more resilience, and... I've probably done things I 123 wouldn't have done before you know... I just decided 124 I'd do it.	Having the confidence to repeat it Having to make big decisions	Having confidence
125 C Are those things like the driving, and the public 126 speaking, that you were referring to before? 127 P Sorry... 128 C What you were referring to before, is that what you 129 mean? 130 P Yes, yes, that's the sort of thing I would have, yes, I 131 wouldn't have done that before... or I would have- 132 yes, no I wouldn't have done that before, I certainly 133 wouldn't, no.	Doing things that are new	Being open to new experiences
134 C You were saying that that was because it was 135 something that you then decided that you had to do? 136 P Yeah, yeah. 137 C With the driving, because you wouldn't have been 138 able to see people? 139 P No, no, it's- especially my friends that live the other 140 side of [location]- being really difficult to get to them, 141 even by rail. I mean it would be possible but it would 142 be a very long journey and I've got two young 143 grandchildren down in [location] and so it would 144 have been very difficult for her to get up to here. So	Doing things for the first time  Doing things out of necessity	Identifying a need

Do experiences make us wise? An exploration of spousal bereavement in later life.

## Appendix I. Example of Category Development

Category	Subcategory	Quote
Initial Impact of loss	Multiple losses	I don't feel old enough to go with the old ladies eating fish and chips and yet I don't really fit into the social set either because I'm on my own. (Janine, 167-169)
		But it's that three number you know, you're always that one out on the edge. (Deborah, 783-784)
		I've got two lots of closest friends, we've got so many plans with them and they've carried on and they're doing everything that we were all going to do together. (Susan, 180-183)
		I know that I've built up a brick wall around me too. (Susan, 718-719)
		My husband died in March, my father died in the- my mother died in the following August and my Father died the following March, so within a year, I'd had 3 bereavements... (Patricia, 524-527)
	Changing roles	If you need to be going somewhere, <i>erm</i> ... decorating, changing the lightbulb, you know, all those sort of things, you have to learn to do, you know putting flat-pack furniture, <i>you</i> know, you can be in all directions but you've got to do it yourself. (Deborah, 651-656)
		We weren't a joined at the hip couple and the practical side of things, that didn't <i>phase</i> me at all, whereas some people I know their husband does everything, does the garden, and washes the car you know, he didn't do anything like that at all and so I didn't miss him that side, it was the purely the emotional side of it that... <i>ef</i> ... you miss out. (Linda, 118-125)
		If it was something big... <i>erm</i> , where were we going on holiday, what would we would we do about when we sold our house, that sort of thing, these big decisions, they were always joint decisions. (Patricia, 615-617)
		When you've got a wife, you know, the wife does these jobs and these jobs and I do other jobs and when you get the whole lot of the jobs lumbered onto you.

		(Robert, 452-455) Before that you're a wife but that's it... um... so you have a whole lot of learning to do because you don't know what you like and what you don't like. (Karen, 791-794)
	<b>Emotional Impact</b>	And I guess when he died, <i>erm</i> ... that was the time where everybody had to grieve if you like, whereas I'd had the 3 years prior to that with our ups and downs you know, we had a good week and then we had a good x-ray week, we had a good chemo week, we'd have a bad week and we'd had all that time to go through all those emotions. (Deborah, 35-42) We had weeks of hell of two misdiagnoses, up to three weeks before he died. (Susan, 290-292) So it was all tough times, you know? Watching somebody go through all the ups and downs and I think in some- maybe not I don't know, but in some ways it's worse for the person watching it, than the person going through it because they know how they are feeling, and your guessing all the time. (Linda, 109-114) That... creates a sort of numbness <i>erm</i> ... puts you sort of onto an automatic survival programme which cuts in but <i>erm</i> ... but... that sort of happens naturally, you don't sort of think about it, you somehow readjusted into taking this situation on. (David, 16-21) Throughout my life, I'd never been on my own, so I'd lived at home, I'd gone off to college... and by the end of college, I'd met my husband... we'd got married, and so I'd never been on my own and suddenly, there I am, on my own, even to the extent of locking my door and sleeping on my own- you know I was quite nervous at first, because I'd never had to- well I had on the odd occasion but <i>erm</i> ... yes, so I had to deal with being on my own I think and that was a bit of a challenge. (Patricia, 462-472)
<b>Triggers</b>	<b>Receiving encouragement</b>	I guess it was friends saying 'come out' rather than me sitting in here, 'come on we're going out, come on, we're doing this, come on we're doing that, and sometimes even now, sometimes I

	<p>think 'I really don't <del>wanna</del> go out', but it does do you good to go out because you become encased in these four walls, <del>etm</del>... and so it does do you good to go out. (Deborah, 445-451)</p> <p>I go out with- it started with two friends, who decided to take David in hand, in other words they'd say, 'right, <del>lets</del> go for a walk and put the world to rights, well that has spun on and there are now five of us. (David, 324-328)</p> <p>I just worked and worked and worked until I was so tired that I could sleep and that was the same as the first time around... busy cleaning the kitchen until 3 in the morning, at that point, and like I said, that went on for a year and then somebody arrived and said 'why don't you come to bowls at [location]? And I thought 'ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh...' and eventually I gave in and went and from then on once I started getting out, I carried on getting out and everything got easier. (Karen, 23-33)</p> <p>Because you know, she had already told me, don't sit around moping and mourning, <del>get</del> back out there into life. Which I did. (Robert, 59-61)</p>
<b>Identifying a need</b>	<p>I think it has made me do more that I would do normally, but I think that's more necessity than- I'm enjoying the things I've joined but... I wouldn't have wanted to do that when he was here, I was quite happy to be here... or whatever we did. (Linda, 228-223)</p> <p>You know, <del>its</del> great company because you can keep in touch with people, you can get a lot of information... you can play games on it, you can... The computer is a companion in a way. (Janine, 195-198)</p> <p>I had never driven to my daughter's on my own and she at that point lived in [location], and I thought 'if I don't drive down there, I'm not going to see her'. (Patricia, 90-93)</p> <p>I had a shining example of an aunt when I was about twelve I suppose, she lost her husband and she sat in the corner until she died, and I thought 'no way would I ever do that' so that was pushing me to get going.</p>



Openness to experiences		(Karen, 61-65)
	Internal Experiences	<p>Your immediate family who are all grieving and <b>upset</b> and you stay strong because you don't want to be the one to be grieving and upset, or to let them see you grieving and upset. Whereas with your church family, I could be as upset as I wanted to be really. (Deborah, 62-67)</p> <p>It's just like, all the different people I've seen, it's like I'm working through another layer each time, when I'm strong enough to face that next layer. (Susan, 350-353)</p> <p>Be true to yourself, don't try to put on airs or try to resist it in an unnatural way. I've heard so many really sad stories of people bottling it up, not wanting to talk about it, hiding all the <b>mememos</b>, and all of that as if it hadn't have happened, as if the person hadn't existed, that's terrible. (David, 209-213)</p>
	Novel Experiences	<p>My daughters always had horses and I thought I'd finished with all of that but now... I sometimes go to the stables with her and do a few jobs there. I have even ridden again recently. (Janine, 76-79)</p> <p>The daughter's wedding was a very emotional time, <b>errm</b>... her grandad was going to give her away and then he died, so I gave her away, which was absolutely amazing but something that I never ever expected having to do, so therefore did the speeches and all that as well, which again was quite emotional, as I was talking about, you know, her dad and her brother, and her grandad and... yeah, that was quite an experience, yeah... amazing. (Deborah, 930-938)</p> <p>I've joined Tai Chi, which I love... because that is calming me down, slowing me down, teaching me to breathe properly, you know? (Linda, 237-240)</p> <p>Yes taking on things... well I think anxiety is part of it you know, you need to get over that because sometimes you think 'oh, I don't think I can do that' or 'I don't think I'll do that' but</p>

		<p>erm... you've got to, usually you've got to go ahead and do it, if it's reasonable you know, I mean I'm not talking about bungee jumping or doing silly things like that. (Beverly, 706-712)</p> <p>I had always played tennis in various tennis clubs and met lots of people through that and any other sports I've been involved in erm... and that's the great way of joining in clubs and meeting people... but I did, erm... yeah I suppose I did have to make a bit of an effort to get involved in other things. (Robert, 359-365)</p> <p>I was more open to suggestion I think. If someone suggested I did something I didn't immediately curl up and run away... I can sit and think about it for a bit longer before I said 'no' (laughs) and then gradually I found myself going out, and being quite happy to go out... but it took at least a year before I could. (Karen, 35-42)</p>
	<b>Different Perspectives</b>	<p>We deal with being on our own totally differently and we have different beliefs you know, it's strange, you know, but it's good I suppose to be different. (Linda, 148-151)</p> <p>I don't want to act as though I'm 45 or anything like that, but I like to keep in the loop with my two older grandchildren. One is 22 and one is 19, erm... and I can converse with them, probably not on the same level (laughs) as them, but I like to know what they're doing, I like to know what they are doing, I'm interested in what they're doing. (Patricia, 675-682)</p> <p>Well they've been mainly beneficial, you meet new circles of friends, different ideas- through different things- not hugely different, but slightly different things and it er... keeps your brain going if you get involved with different things, er... and that's extremely good for you. (Robert, 367-372)</p> <p>Because I can talk (laughs) I talk a lot and listen, I like to listen to other people and I like to know that people are different and have their own... problems and enjoyment. (Laura, 422-425)</p>



## **Appendix J. Example of Memo Writing**

### **Awareness of own mortality**

Not sure where this sits. Janine talks about this occurring in the context of her husband dying. She talks about this occurring afterwards and of it being frightening but also implies that this causes her to make the most of the time she has left. I'm not sure whether this is part of being open to different thoughts and feelings or whether this is something that has developed in terms of wisdom. For instance reflection on the deep existential questions. Does this then allow her to act upon her worries about how long she has left in a productive way?

*I keep thinking now 'I must go to so and so, I must go to Paris, or I must go and see Prague or Barcelona, or I must go to Vienna' erm... 'I must make the opportunity to go and see all of these places if I can' so there is a bit of a sort of panicking feel about it I guess. (Janine, 365-370)*

This seems to imply that the thoughts about how long has she got left trigger the urge to go and travel the world. Janine goes on to take about not wanted to miss out on the things that she has missed out on in her life. She also talks about not previously having the opportunity to travel due to the times she grew up in and becoming busy with family life. There's almost a sense of regret also... do the regrets associated with being aware of ones' own mortality trigger openness to new experiences? Do people have different vehicles to being open to new experiences? There also seems to be a process of looking back on life – reflecting on lost opportunities and how can she carry on into the remaining years feeling satisfied that she has lived a life well lived? This reminds me of Erikson's psychosocial stages and of working towards being ok with how one has lived their life in order to not fear death.

For Linda it seems as though awareness of own mortality leads to an appreciation of life which then leads to being more open. Do others find that this leads them to being open? Does it cause fear in others?

### **Being cocooned – Openness**

I'm wondering about this idea that openness comes from somewhere and doesn't just happen spontaneously. After going through the transcripts again I was struck by the idea of almost emerging from a cocoon. All the difficult emotions that arise from losing a spouse are tied up in fear and uncertainty about the future. The majority of participants talk about contentment with their spouses, and in some narratives there seems to be a process whereby there is a search for stability – be it in routine, keeping busy or carrying on as before... before becoming open to experiences. Deborah talks about still holding onto the cocoon although hints at that not being so much so now, but perhaps when she gets tired and overwhelmed. She talks about almost now having a balance between time and space alone and time exploring novel

things. Is this qualitatively difference – it comes through the narrative that Deborah is happy with having that balance but is the initial process of being cocooned about something else? I'm not sure at this stage whether there is other evidence in the transcripts for this but I will come back to this.

### **Impact of Grief – Openness**

Looking at the diagram of relationships between categories it feels like there is something missing here, for instance how does one get from impact of grief to openness, because not all people would lead there? Although it seems well supported in the participants – it may be that there are different routes here. I am getting a sense in the narratives that this might be the case and so I will go back through the interviews to explore this more. I wonder if the impact of grief category is too thematic. On the one hand this allows some context but on the other, I have a hunch that I am missing something out on this. I have explained the contextual factors and the nuances of how one leads to openness from impact of grief but I wonder if the data might support another category that explains this process more.

What conditions cause participants to become open to experiences?

### ***Appendix K. Example of Reflections***

I found that I wasn't saying much at all in the first interview. I felt like I was stifled by my fear of being too leading, imposing my own ideas, and wondered whether I was coming across as vague and detached. Perhaps I could have been more curious and entered into more of an interactive space.

.....

I feel quite overwhelmed at the process, and wondering why I didn't choose a method I was more familiar with. Keep finding myself trying to put together diagrams of what might be going on in the data, as this feels more 'legitimate' or that the data feels more contained and manageable. I think that this is helpful because it is sparking new ideas and insights. For example, I hadn't noticed the prominence of openness in terms of potential connections to wisdom and growth. This seems to be something that is evident in the narratives despite not asking about it. After discussing this with my supervisor, I feel that this is important in getting the creative juices flowing but I must be careful that this does not then become a parallel analytic process. Furthermore, because of my familiarity with the area that I am aware I need to stay close to the data and not attempt to force my data into preconceived frameworks. I feel that this is a balancing act between trying to organise, sort and make sense of the data and keeping the process emergent.

Also grappling with how to develop the interview questions in order for them to become more focused. On the one hand, being broad in the questions seems to me to add some validity, as the responses are less guided and more spontaneously occur, and on the other hand becoming more focused allows greater development of the emerging codes and categories. I think that I am perhaps worried of missing something important.

.....

I find myself trying to reframe incidents in interviews as being positive and perhaps I have been closing myself off to the negative. Some interviews start as very positive, and I construct the notion of the 'wise sage' in my mind. However, as the interviews progress, it becomes evident that there is an immense amount of suffering. I find myself making the judgment that wisdom and distress cannot co-exist, yet if I stay close to the data it seems as though, yes they can co-exist.